We Drank a Thousand Times

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/850635.

Rating:
Mature

Archive Warning:
Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Category:
M/M

Fandom:
Supernatural

Relationships:
Dean Winchester/Original Male Character(s), Cassie Robinson/Dean Winchester

Characters:
Dean Winchester, Sam Winchester, John Winchester, Cassie Robinson, Original Characters

Additional Tags:
Original Character Death(s), References to Underage Prostitution, Homophobia, Implied/Referenced Rape/Non-con, Pre-Canon

Language:
English

Collections:
Supernatural and J2 Big Bang 2010

Stats:
Published: 2010-07-21 Words: 43,186 Chapters: 6/6

We Drank a Thousand Times

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Summary

They meet in a bar fight in North Carolina when Dean is nineteen, broke, and desperate, then again when a hunt brings the Winchesters into town a few years later. Neither one of them ever puts a name to it but every once in a while, through the years, Dean finds his way back.

Notes

Got no time to for spreadin' roots, The time has come to be gone.
And to' our health we drank a thousand times, it's time to ramble on...
-Led Zeppelin; 'Ramble On'

Chapter 1

July 1998

It's a hot Saturday night, and Jay's sitting in his usual spot, nursing a beer and watching a fight brewing over by the pool tables. It's three on one, Jimmy and Earl and Big Eddie against a new kid, and it hasn't come to blows yet but Jay's pretty sure that's only a matter of time. The kid's been hustling those three all night, and by Jay's estimation they're more than five hundred in the hole.

The new kid's young; real young, could pass for sixteen without breaking a sweat. Watching him, Jay's pretty sure he's older than he looks, but not by much. Grown men don't like getting scammed by someone whose stubble still grows in patchy, but that ain't the whole problem, either. They get kids in here sometimes. This place don't exactly run straight by the letter of the law, so it's not all that uncommon for tough little punks to hang around in search of a pool game and an easy mark.

The real problem is how goddamn pretty the kid is. Not just good-looking but downright *pretty*, a porn director's wet-dream even with the ratty clothes and the crew cut. Jimmy and Earl and Eddie probably figured him for easy pickings, and Jay can't entirely blame them; with a face like that, it's easy to miss the strength in his wiry arms, the easy balance in his posture, the spark of pure crazy in his big green eyes. Even Jay didn't figure him for a hustler at first, and he's usually got an eye for that kind of thing.

There's another kid with him, even younger, a gangly puppy dog of a teenager watching from the sidelines with an expression that's half-worried, half-resigned. Brothers, Jay thinks, and takes another pull on his beer.

The kid sets his cue against the dirty floor, leans into it a little, grinning. "Believe you fellows owe me some cash."

"You believe wrong," snarls Big Eddie. He's the one who lost most of the money, mostly because he's a big dumb drunk who don't know how to figure out when he's getting played.

The kid grins wider, bouncing on the balls of his feet like he knows how this is gonna go down and doesn't mind it one bit. "Come on,

don't be like that, I'll even buy you a beer. You lost fair and square. Three times."

Fair and square is probably stretching it, but Eddie kept on betting after the kid sucked him in and started milking it, so Jay figures he deserves to clean out his wallet.

"I don't lose to pretty-boy faggots like you," Eddie says, balling up his huge fists, and just like that the tension that's been rocketing up snaps, hard. The pool cue becomes a weapon in the kid's bony hands, cracking in half across Eddie's broad face almost before Jay sees him move; the thin end spins off to clatter on the floor and the kid reverses his grip and drives the blunt end into Eddie's gut with violent precision.

Eddie folds, gasping, and the kid kicks his knees out from under him, then shoves the cue under his throat like the muzzle of a gun. It takes all of five seconds, and Jimmy and Earl are still rocking back in shock when the kid turns to his brother. His expression is manic and more than a little bloodthirsty. "Get the money, Sammy."

"Dean--"

"Now."

Sammy grimaces awkwardly, glancing up around the bar. Mostly, nobody's paying much attention. People get knocked down sometimes at Rocky's, and if you ain't already in the middle of the situation, it's usually smart to keep clear. All he's really got to worry about are Jimmy and Earl, but that could make for a problem. Sammy moves like he knows how to handle himself but he's really just a kid, not more than fifteen and maybe not even that; he don't have the bulk to take on two full-grown men, even if he knows the theory.

It don't take long for Jimmy and Earl to get past the shock of seeing Big Eddie pinned by a wiry little twink, and just like Jay figured they're going from surprised to pissed off pretty damn quick.

"Oh, hell," he mutters, drains his beer and slides off his bar stool. He don't like to get involved with this type of bullshit, but he's not gonna just stand by while those gorillas lay the smackdown on a couple of kids.

And it's not like he really has to do anything. Just slides in next to the

pool table, picks up an extra cue, and says, "Looked like y'all owed these boys some money."

"They scammed us," Jimmy says sullenly, but he's already backing down, fists unclenching. He tangled with Jay once, a few years back, and he ain't yet been stupid enough to try it a second time.

"Ought to be a lesson to you, then," Jay says mildly. To his left, Dean's giving him a narrow-eyed look, like he ain't quite sure what the hell Jay's up to. "Come on, now. You don't want to make me do this the old-fashioned way, do you?"

He hooks a finger under the chain around his neck and pulls out the dogtags he still wears under his shirt. Not that it earns him much respect around here, but it's enough to remind those two that settling things with him the old-fashioned way still ain't the best idea in town.

Jimmy's eyes follow the movement, and then he turns his head aside and spits contemptuously. "Fine. Fucking queers can stick together."

"Oh, now don't be like that," Jay says, and grins at his face. Then turns to the younger brother. Sammy. Sam. "Kid, y'all better get your winnings and hightail it out of here."

Sam opens his mouth like he's going to protest, and his brother shoots him a glance. "Sammy."

"Fine." His tone is snippy, but Jay don't miss the nervous way he's hunching his shoulders when he reaches for the stack of twenties on the table. From the floor, Eddie opens his mouth, red-faced, but he closes it again when Dean jams the pool cue viciously into his throat.

Sam actually counts out the cash, and Dean makes a huffing, impatient noise. "That's my money, Sam."

"Screw you," Sam mutters, but he hands it over. Dean pockets it, tosses the pool cue aside, and turns, finally, to face Jay.

"Thanks," he says. He don't really sound like he means it, but Jay wasn't expecting any kind of gratitude at all, so it's something.

"Don't mention it," Jay says, keeping on an eye on Eddie while the big lug struggles to his feet. "Y'all get on out of here, now."

For a minute, Dean looks like he's gonna say something else, but he finally just shakes his head, grabs his brother by the arm, and steers him out the door.

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It never really gets cool in Canfield, North Carolina in July, but at least outside there's a breeze coming in off the river and the air doesn't stink of sweat and beer. It's late enough that it's quiet--hell, in a town this size, it's lights-out after nine-thirty. Streetlamps just light up the five blocks of main road, and once they cross the highway there's no light but the half-moon riding low on the horizon. An old farm truck rumbles past them as they cross over the bridge on the way out of town, but other than that it might as well be a ghost town.

Except for Sam, of course. Dean's been counting down in his head since they left the bar behind them, and sure enough--

"What the hell was that?" Sam's voice is just starting to change, cracking in a way Dean's never did. It makes his periodic attempts at sternness downright comical.

"What?"

"You tried to start a bar fight!"

"I didn't try anything," Dean says. His palms tingle with the satisfying memory of the pool cue cracking when he hit that fat fucker in the head, and even though he knows it'll just aggravate Sammy he can't resist a grin. "I put that son of a bitch *down."*

"You could have gotten hurt."

"Nah." He thumbs the roll of bills stuffed in the pocket of his jeans; most of the back rent they owe old man McGee. Enough to keep him off their backs until Dad gets back, hopefully. "We need the money. Couldn't risk him trying to welch on the bet."

"Sure," Sam grumbles. *"That's* why you hit him."

"He did have it coming. Mouthy bastard, wasn't he?"

"Dean..."

"Well, he was."

One of these days, he's gonna be able to walk into a bar without some douchebag calling him a faggot or trying to pick him up. Until then, he's more than happy to do a little re-educating where it's needed. Kind of like a public service.

"You're such an asshole," Sam says. "You're lucky that guy showed up when he did."

"I had it covered. And this asshole is the one paying for your freaking cavity-inducing sugar fixation, so watch your mouth."

Sam makes a sound somewhere between a snort and a groan. It sounds kind of like a dying cat. "Whatever."

It's a good two mile hike to the trailer park, and by the time they get there Dean's joints feel puffy and swollen with the heat. Their door's hanging open a little--damn thing never latches, not that they have anything valuable to worry about in there--and he's just hoping there aren't raccoons inside again. It's after two in the morning. All he wants to do is lock the doors, chug a soda and pass out without having to chase oversized rodents out of the kitchen cabinets, and he says as much to Sam.

"Raccoons are procyonids," says Sam around a yawn. "Not rodents."

Dean kicks the door shut and stares at him. "How are you such a geek?"

"Some of us actually go to class." He can't see Sam's face, but he can hear the pout.

Dean flicks on the sputtering yellow overhead light and takes a look around. No *procyonids* to be seen. "Lock the doors, would you? I'm ready to crash."

He doesn't hear whatever it is Sam mumbles back at him, but at this point he's too tired to care. Bed's not anything fancy, just two twin mattresses shoved against the loose faux-wood paneling in the smaller of the two bedrooms. Dad's off on a hunting trip (by himself, because apparently it's *too dangerous* for Dean this time) and one of them could probably take his room, but that doesn't quite feel right, somehow.

He's pretty much used to sharing a room with Sam at this point, anyway. No big deal.

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They manage to avoid old man McGee for the next couple of days. Dean's winnings are enough to cover maybe two thirds of their back rent and if he does some fast talking, that might be enough, but he'd rather not test it. Especially since Dad'll be back any day now.

Sam doesn't outright argue when Dean tells him that, but he does point out that Dean's been saying that for the past three weeks. Which is true, but it doesn't mean anything. Dad's on a job. He got bogged down. It happens. It's not like he hasn't been in touch.

"...right," Sam says, dropping a can of tomato soup into their cart.

Dean adds three cans of chicken noodle, the cheap brand that all the little groceries out here sell. It'd be cheaper at the big chain store up the road, but that's a ten mile hike. "Dude, do we have to go over this again? I talked to Pastor Jim yesterday and he said--"

Sam kicks his foot. "Hush."

"What?"

He looks up. It's the guy from the bar, coming up the aisle with a basket full of beer and sandwich fixings. Dean didn't get a good look at him at the bar the other night, but there's not much more to see during the day. He's nothing special. Just a guy, early thirties, lean and unshaven, sandy hair too long and falling in his eyes. Something about the way he moves catches the eye, though. Economical, balanced, like a hunter or a soldier. He had dogtags on in the bar, Dean remembers, and there's no reason to think they weren't legit.

He sees them, makes no pretense that he doesn't, but just as Dean's filling up his mouth with friendly small-talk that he really doesn't want to do right now, the guy gives them a nod and walks past without a word.

Dean's watching him disappear around the corner when Sam kicks him again. "Ow! What?"

"You could have said thank you."

"I did say thank you. The other night." Sam opens his mouth, and Dean cuffs him upside the head. "Come on. Can we finish shopping before I keel over of starvation?"

Mae at the counter is always good for a little bit of sweet-talking; Dean's pretty sure she can see right through him, but that doesn't stop her from blushing and dimpling up when he tells her he likes her new shirt. She's got a frowzy, overblown kind of prettiness that he likes, even if she is old enough to have a daughter Sam's age. Experience is just a bonus. Shame she has a husband. He's a useless dick, but Dean's been trying to stay away from the whole adultery scene when he can avoid it. Especially in towns like these, where everybody and their cousin has a gun-rack in the back window. It would be pretty embarrassing to survive ghoulies and ghosties only to get blown away by a jealous husband.

Still, Mae needs to smile more, so he doesn't feel too guilty about laying it on extra-thick today. If there's one thing Dean Winchester is good at, it's making women smile.

The fact that she slips a couple of prepackaged sticky-buns in his bag after he pays is just a bonus.

"That wasn't nice of you," Sam tells him when the door swings shut behind them.

"Shut up and eat your sweets," Dean says absently. The guy from the bar is at the counter now, and from the way Mae's talking to him, they're old friends. 'Course, with a town like this, that's hard to tell; it's small and Southern, which means that everybody chats with everybody. Through the window, Dean watches her throw back her head and laugh, frosted-blonde curls bouncing. Bar Guy is smiling, too, but it's more reserved, tucked into the corners of his mouth like he's not sure he wants to let it out. He's kind of a no-color guy, sandy hair, worker's tan and pale blue eyes, brown t-shirt and faded jeans.

"Are we going to stand out here all day, or what?" Sam says.

Dean blinks, looks down at his little brother. "Have you always been this much of a pain in the ass? I can't remember."

"Shut up," Sam grumbles around a mouthful of pastry. "Can we go now?"

"Yeah," Dean says, turning away. "Let's go."

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Their luck had to run out sooner or later and sure enough, when they get back to the trailer there's old man McGee sitting on the front step with a shotgun across his lap, heavy gut spilling over his belt, sweat-stains on his ratty wifebeater. "Hi, boys."

Dean hands his bag to Sam and shifts to stand between him and McGee. He doesn't really care for the way McGee's been looking at his brother. Not like he's never sold his ass to pay the rent, but it's different if it's Sammy. A fat greasebag like McGee has no call to be looking at Sammy like he's a side of beef. "Hey, Roger. We've been trying to catch up to you. Got some rent money for you."

"That's right good to hear," says McGee, stroking the barrel of his .16 gauge thoughtfully. "I was afraid I was gonna hafta take it out of your hides."

Dean laughs, hopes it doesn't sound as hollow as it feels. "Now why would you think a thing like that?"

"Oh, you know." McGee heaves himself to his feet. "Tough times. Folks skipping out on their rent. Makes an honest businessman a mite twitchy."

Honest businessman, my ass. "Well, twitch no more." He hands over the roll of bills tucked in the pocket of his jeans, five hundred dollars minus what they scraped off for groceries. Hoping McGee won't count it, but of course the greasy bastard won't make it easy on them. Sam shifts his weight nervously behind him while McGee thumbs through the money.

"This ain't all you owe me."

Dean hears Sam draw in breath, and he steps back hard on his little brother's foot. "We'll get you the rest."

"Seems I been hearing that a lot lately," says McGee.

"Cross my heart." He places a hand on his chest. "Would I lie to you, Roger?"

McGee grunts, looks him up and down, beady eyes assessing. "You better not. You got to next week to pay me, or I *am*taking it out of you boys one way or another. We clear?"

And yeah, Dean doesn't miss the way McGee's eyes flicker toward Sam. Manfully, he resists the urge to put his fist in the man's face. Dad's gonna be back by next week anyway, and he can always go scam a few more dumb drunks down at Rocky's in the meantime. He's totally on top of this. "Crystal."

"Good." McGee bumps his shoulder carelessly as he walks past, and Dean just barely has the self-control to keep from tripping him flat on his face in the dust.

"Did you hear him?" Sam hisses when McGee's out of earshot. "He's going to *shoot* us if we don't pay him."

Dean doesn't bother to clarify the misconception. "Yeah, Sam, I heard him. We'll get the money. Let's get that food inside before it all goes bad, huh?"

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"Boss, I'm heading out."

Jay sets his lug wrench down and leans around the oversized wheel on the battered Dodge 4X4 he's currently working on. "You done already?"

George is already halfway out the door. "I'll finish her up on Monday," he says, and the door slams shut.

Jay swears under his breath and tightens the last lug nut with a sharp jerk. Seems like all the goddamn cars in town just up and decided to break down right around the same time his latest deadbeat employee quit, and the downside of owning the place is that he's the one who gets to pick up the slack.

It's a job. It's a good job, even if he has to remind himself of that from

time to time. Dillon's Garage was a tumbledown old wreck when Jay took it over and he never did bother with prettying it up, but he does alright. Better than alright, really. Town this size, there ain't much competition.

He likes the work, for the most part. Likes cars better than he does most people, and other than a tumbledown farmhouse on a couple acres of rocky land and ten thousand dollars of debt that he's been chipping at for the past five years, it's all he has left of his parents. They didn't exactly part on friendly terms and he wasn't planning to stick around when he came back to take care of the estate a few years back, but--

Well, by that point, he didn't have anyplace else to be. It's alright, though. It's home.

It's dark by the time he closes up, and he's got half a mind to just drive home, but it's been a couple of days since he's swung by Rocky's. Maybe long enough that Earl and his asshole friends won't get up his ass about stepping in the other night, maybe not, but either way he's got just as much a right to be there as any one of them. No matter how much some of those boys like to run their mouths.

It's probably the ornery streak that decides him, in the end.

He's smoking by the bar and shooting the breeze with some traveling salesman from Memphis when those two goddamn kids walk in again. It's just like the last time; Dean all swagger and attitude that he don't quite have the years to pull off yet, Sam trailing in his wake like a sulky shadow. They make a beeline for the pool tables.

"Heard those Winchester boys got into it with Big Eddie," says Marty behind the bar. The Bud Light sign above the door reflects off the shiny brown dome of his head.

"Yup," Jay says succinctly, stubbing his smoke out in one of the jam jar lids that serve as ashtrays in this fine establishment.

"Heard you got into it too."

Jay shrugs. "Just a friendly word about paying his debts. Didn't hardly have to say a thing."

Marty sighs. "Just watch your back, okay?"

Mister Traveling Salesman is looking back and forth between them like it's a ping-pong tournament or something. Jay shrugs again, deliberately slow. "Don't see how it's such a big thing."

"Try not to be any dumber than your mama made you," Marty says sharply, setting the glass he's wiping down with an audible thump. "You stepping in to save some pretty kid--"

"He ain't a day under nineteen." At least that's what Mae told him when he asked about those boys, and for all Dean's soft mouth and big sleepy eyes make him look younger, Jay's inclined to believe it. "And that ain't got a thing to do with it."

"You know how it's gonna look," Marty finishes like Jay hasn't said a word. "I'm not saying anything, you know that. Just, you know how it's gonna look."

"I don't give a good goddamn how it looks," Jay says, a little more snap in his voice than he means. Mister Traveling Salesman slides nervously off his seat and slinks over to the other end of the bar, and Jay ignores him. "Get me another beer, would you?"

"Boy, you got some kind of death wish," says Marty, and plunks the bottle down in front of him.

Jay grins. "Nah. You betting against those two?"

Marty peers nearsightedly over at the pool tables, where Dean is cleaning out another traveling-salesman type, a pinched-looking guy with too much hair on top and the kind of little smirk that says he thinks he's too good for this kind of place. Sam is tucked into a booth nearby with a soda and a hardcover book as thick as Jay's head, pointedly ignoring his brother. Kid's gonna ruin his eyes reading in this light.

"Well?"

"I'm betting you get your head bashed in one of these days," Marty says, sounding annoyed.

"You volunteering for the job, old man?"

"Don't tempt me." Marty flicks the wet bar rag at Jay and turns away

to start pouring beers for the cluster of field hands that just rolled in.

Over by the pool tables, the guy is scowling while Dean counts a stack of bills. He says something, and his face falls when the guy shakes his head sharply and stalks away.

Jay shakes his head and applies his attention to his beer, and he only half-notices when Dean flops onto a bar-stool a few seats down from him. When his bottle's half-empty, the kid's still sitting there, staring absently at the dusty old moose-head Marty keeps over the bar. Jay looks down at his beer, back at Dean, and sighs. Marty's right. One of these days, he's gonna get his sorry ass lynched. "Hey, kid. Winchester, right?"

Dean controls his startle fast, gives him a narrow-eyed look. "Yeah?"

"Come here a minute."

Dean slides off his chair and edges marginally closer, crossing his arms over his chest. His elbows form two bony points, and his eyes are narrowed. "What?"

"Heard you boys have some money troubles."

"Yeah? Who told you that?"

"Don't take a genius to figure it out." Dean's Led Zeppelin t-shirt is bleach-stained and ratty around the collar, and it looks like it might be older than he is. "But Mae's a good friend of mine, and she mighta mentioned something."

"Nice lady," Dean says guardedly. "What's it to you?"

"Might have a way for you to earn some quick cash, if you're interested."

Just like that, Dean's suspicious expression goes flat and cold. "Dude, I don't know what you're thinking, but I'm not a mule and I'm not for sale."

The *not yet* is unspoken, but Jay's been around the block enough times to hear it anyway. Kid like that, it probably wouldn't be the first time.

"I'm not buying," he says mildly. "Got a garage up on Whitehorn Road,

could use a few extra hands."

"Yeah?" Dean lifts his chin. "Doing what?"

"Depends how much you know about cars."

That gets him an almost-smile, still edged with something a little too hard to be called fear. "You're actually serious, aren't you?"

Jay lifts his beer. "Wouldn't have offered if I wasn't." The Coors is spit-warm and foamy on his tongue, and he grimaces as he puts the bottle down. "You turn up on Monday, I'll put you to work. If not, it's no skin off my nose. Your choice."

Dean hesitates, glances over toward his brother. "I'll think about it," he says finally.

Jay shrugs, gets to his feet. Bar's getting too crowded this time of night, and he's got a six-pack of cold beer and a date with his lounge chair waiting for him at home. "You do that."

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Jay isn't honestly sure whether or not he's expecting the two of them to turn up, but when he rolls into the parking lot a little after six on Monday, they're standing there like a pair of skinny ghosts in the morning fog. He can feel them staring at him as he crosses the lot, weaving between the old junkers that make up the bulk of his custom, but he just nods vaguely and unlocks the front door.

"Got a coffee maker in the office," he says without looking up. Kids like this are like wild animals; you gotta be careful if you don't want them to fight or run. "Bagels, too. They're probably stale, but they'll do you if you're not fussy."

They both shift their feet restlessly, but it's Sam who finally speaks. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it," Jay says, standing aside to let them pass him into the shop. "Ain't a handout. I do need the help around here and I'm expecting you to work." It's more or less the truth, even if he don't need the help anywhere near as much as those two need the money.

It's cool and dark inside, and he breathes deep the familiar smell of dirt and axle grease. This is his favorite time of day, when the sun hangs low on the eastern horizon and the road is quiet and his shop ain't full of chattering idiots. There's just these two boys, and they don't seem inclined to chat. He starts up the coffee, jerks his chin at the mini-fridge on his desk. "Bagels and cream cheese in there. Help yourself."

Sam hesitates by the door, and Dean gives him a shove inside. "See if there's any onion in there, Sammy."

"Gross, man." Sam wrinkles his nose, but opens the fridge and rummages through the plastic grocery bag. He lobs a bagel at his brother's head, and Dean catches it deftly and grins. Out of the corner of his eye Jay can catch the shape of it, wide and sunny and nothing like the defensive smirk he's been wearing the last few times Jay ran across him.

He looks away. Dean's a good-looking kid, and old enough that 'kid' probably ain't the right word for him, but Jay's damned if he's gonna make any of the nasty rumors about himself true.

The coffee maker belches out a cloud of steam, and he pours himself a cup before turning to lean against the edge of the counter. "Either of you boys know anything about mechanics?"

"Dean does," says Sam, with a sideways glance at his brother.

"Yeah, Sammy's useless in a shop," says Dean around a mouthful of bagel. The wariness isn't gone, not by a long shot, but it's softened by interest now. Or maybe it's just that Jay's feeding him. "He likes *books,* the freak."

"You're a freak," Sam mutters, but he's smiling when he bites into his own stale bagel like it's the best thing he's ever tasted.

"Right," Jay says. "So. Last high-school dropout I hired up and quit on me. Job's two hundred a week, cash only. That do you?"

Dean chews his lip for a moment, thoughtful, then nods abruptly. "Yeah," he says at last. "That'd be great."

"Good," Jay says, and stick out his hand. Dean shakes it, warm grip firm. He's got calluses on his hands and grease under his nails, and

maybe this won't turn out the be a total charity case after all.

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Liking the car part of it doesn't come as a surprise. Sam can get on his case all he wants about dropping out, but even if it weren't for the hunt, there isn't much school can teach Dean that he wants to know. He's always understood the shape of the world with his hands.

The rest of it's pretty cool too, though, and that does come as a surprise. Jay doesn't honestly seem to care where the two of them are from or what they're doing in Canfield, and the other guys back off after Dean's explanations start to involve flying saucers, but for the most part everybody's friendly. And yeah, getting up early enough to catch a ride in with Jerry from across the park kind of completely sucks, especially since Sam doesn't get why Dean won't let him stay home by himself and likes to express his displeasure with the situation loudly and often. Like hell is Dean leaving him anywhere near McGee's clutches without supervision, though, and even with his bitching it's kind of nice to have a regular schedule.

None of that quite compares to the satisfaction he gets when he knocks on McGee's front door and shoves his first week's paycheck in the fucker's face, though. At this rate, they might even manage to save up a cushion by the time Dad gets back. If this is what it's like to be a regular Joe, he guesses it's not so bad.

He hears the rumors, though. Well, freaking *duh*, Dad taught him well enough that he knows to look out for anything funny going on, which means that he gets wise to a lot of stuff that has nothing to do with murderous supernatural entities. Dean is plugged in. He hears stuff.

In this particular case, he'd have to be deaf, blind, and a moron not to get wind of the stories about Jay. Military. Marines, is what George at the desk says. "Until they gave him the boot. I heard it was a dishonorable discharge or something. You know, for conduct unbecoming an officer, or whatever they call it when you turn homo."

Dean smiles and passes over the socket wrench and doesn't bother explaining that dishonorable discharge is mostly what you get when you go shoot some random civvie full of holes, not when you get caught blowing an NCO behind the mess.

Mike, a grizzled old ex-con with a few Navy tattoos, takes Dean aside his third day at the shop and asks him how he's doing.

Dad's in way over his head on some freaking hunt three states over and I can't cover his six because I'm stuck here in the ass-end of nowhere babysitting my little brother, how the hell do you think I'm doing, is what he thinks.

"Dude, I'm great," is what he says.

"Okay," Mike says. He's jittery in a way that makes Dean think he might have a coke habit, but he's a decent kind of guy for a washed-up old nutcase. "You just take care of yourself. Take care of that brother of yours, too. 'Specially around Jay."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Dean asks, like he doesn't already have a pretty good idea.

"Nothin'," Mike says hastily. "I ain't saying nothin'. Jay's a good guy, don't let nobody tell you different. Just watch yourself, huh?"

Yeah, in case the freaky queer mechanic breaks into his place to steal his little brother or something. Could be worse, it's not like they're burning crosses on the guy's front lawn, but Dean finds the whole thing a little weird. Last place they were living was a fourth-floor walk-up in Vegas, right smack in the middle of the district where rich assholes go to get their freak on with teenage boys. Dean used to hang out on the stoop with this tough little hooker named Carlos, sharing smokes and shooting the breeze while they watched the Volvos and Lexuses crawl up and down the block.

Compared to some of the people who hung around there, Jay's about as square as it gets, and Dean doesn't really get why half the town seems to care so damn much which flavor the guy likes to bang when it doesn't seem like he's actually banging anybody at all.

Come to think about it, Dean's not entirely sure why he spends so much time thinking about it himself, either.

"Hey, Jay," he says in the middle of the second week. He's bleeding the brake lines of this little Ford Escort that's got more rust on it than paint, and Jay's in the driver's seat with one of his ubiquitous cigarettes dangling from his fingers out the window. It makes Dean wonder if customers ever kick up a fuss about the tobacco smell.

"Yeah?"

"You got a wife or something? Never see you with anybody."

Hey, nobody ever said he was subtle. He pokes his head out from under the chassis in time to see Jay's long fingers flick a column of ash on the shop floor, and when he speaks he sounds caught somewhere between wary and amused. "You know I ain't got a wife or a girl or anybody like that, Dean."

It's not often he calls Dean by his first name; mostly it's *boy* or *kid* or *hey you*. Dean ducks his head back under the car, smelling asphalt and brake fluid. "Yeah," he admits. "I guess I do."

"Alright, then." There's the soft, squishy noise of the brakes pumping, and more liquid dribbles into the five-gallon bucket next to Dean's head. "Still feel kinda soft. There's air in the line."

And that's the end of that conversation.

***

Another two weeks, and Dad is still not. Fucking. Home.

Times like this, Dean sort of wishes he wasn't working at the garage. The regular paycheck is kind of nice, but right about now he's wishing he had an excuse to go into Rocky's and pick a fight.

"How you boys set for money?" Dad asks during his nightly phone call. It's after seven, sticky-hot and the sky is heavy with rain that isn't ready to fall. They're at the table, eating cold mac and cheese with the cheap fan blowing right in their faces, and Dean still feels like he's about to start melting any second now.

"We're good, Dad," he says, looping the phone cord around his wrist like a handcuff. A sticky, coiled handcuff. "Picking up some hours at a garage in town."

"Good." Dad sighs. "That's good, son. You know I'll be back in a few days."

"Yessir," Dean says, ignoring the look Sam is giving him across the

kitchen table. This is their ritual, and maybe it's stupid that it makes him feel better to hear it, but it's still true. "I know. Kick some ass."

He keeps a smile on his face until there's static on the other end, then sets the phone down. Sam jabs a fork at his plastic bowl of mac and cheese. "Did he say when he'll be home?"

"A couple of days," Dean tells him firmly. "Just a couple of days."

"Right," Sam mutters. He looks sweaty and ill-tempered. Dean waits to see if he's going to make some kind of wiseass remark, but he doesn't. Smart move.

***

The next day is slow as hell, mostly because anybody with half a brain is sitting at home in front of the open fridge door. It's pretty cool in the garage, though, and Dean bums a cigarette from George and goes around to the front to smoke it. Sam's gonna give him hell if he sees, but Sam's off in the back room with his head buried in some ginormous book he stole from the library, so he's safe for now.

He draws in a mouthful of smoke and blows it out into the heavy air. This time of year, the heat has burnt all the scrub grass out front yellow, and the trees along the side of the road look droopy.

"That ain't good for you, you know," says Jay, coming up beside him with one of his Marlboro Reds hanging from his lower lip. He's got a ball-cap pulled low over his sandy hair, and Dean can see the outline of his dogtags under his t-shirt. Funny how he still wears them, after everything.

"Yup," Dean says, flicking ash at the oil-stained concrete floor, and Jay smiles, creasing the beginnings of laugh lines at the corners of his eyes.

"Reckon I don't have much call to talk."

Dean glances up, grins at him. "Yeah, not so much. I don't smoke much. My dad would kick my ass if he caught me. He was a Marine," he adds offhandedly. "All about keeping in fighting trim, you know?"

If Jay was anybody else, that would have been his cue to mention his

own stint in the Corps. Of course, he's Jay, which means that he just nods thoughtfully and takes another drag on his cigarette. The man's not much for talking. Dad would have a fit trying to interview him for a case, and that thought makes Dean grin wider.

And then, all of a sudden, Sam's there. He doesn't even seem to notice the cigarette that Dean drops when he grabs his arm. "Hey, Jay. Dean, can I talk to you for a second?"

"Sammy, what--" That's all he manages to get out before Sam is all but dragging him outside. Damn kid's getting strong. And he's babbling about a mile a minute, skipping whole parts of the sentences the way he always does when he's overexcited.

"--freaking finally, dude, I just talked to him--"

"Woah, woah, woah. Slow down." He gets his hands on Sam's shoulders, grips tight. Sam's humming like a live wire, all but bouncing in his ragged sneakers. "Okay. Start making sense."

"Dad called," Sam says. "He's on his way in now. He said to get packed."

***

Truth is, Jay's not expecting to see those boys again after the way they rushed out yesterday, but next morning, they're waiting in front of the garage like always. Sam's fidgeting, but Dean has lost almost all of the habitual tension he's carried since the moment Jay met him; he actually looks like a kid for a change. Instead of old Jerry's pickup, there's a sleek black muscle car idling on the other side of the lot, a late-sixties model Impala from the looks of it, beautiful car. He can see the dark shape of a big man behind the wheel, but it's too far away to make out any kind of detail.

"So," Jay says. "Reckon this is goodbye."

Sam fidgets, looking halfway between nervous and guilty, but Dean just sticks a hand out with a wry grin. "Yeah. Gotta move on, man. It's been great."

"Y'all take care of yourselves, you hear?" Jay unfolds his billfold, counts out ten twenty dollar bills.

"You don't have to--"

"Think I'm gonna stiff you for last week's work?" He shoves the money into Dean's hand. "Be seeing you."

Dean gives him a slanted grin, stuffs the money in his pocket, and adjusts the strap of his bag. "Seriously, Jay, thank you."

"Yeah," Jay says. "Get outta here. Your ride's waiting."

He watches the two of them cross the cracked pavement to where the car is parked, falling unconsciously into perfect unison, soldiers and brothers both.

He's got the strangest feeling he ain't seen the last of the Winchester boys.

Chapter 2

May, 2000

Truth is, Jay's getting damn sick of hearing hymns sung in Eddie VanKampp's name. He was a bastard when he was breathing, and Jay don't see how he's any less of a bastard now that he's six feet under. Nobody outside his drinking buddies much liked him anyway, and it's Mae who's rotting in a jail cell like some kind of goddamn animal. After what he did to her little girl, the town ought to be having a bar-b-que to celebrate him getting his brains blown out. Hell, Jay'd be happy to bring the beer.

"You should have told me," he tells Mae when he goes to visit her. "I would have handled it."

Her hair's flat and faded, skinned back in a ponytail instead of all primped up like he's used to, and she looks younger than usual without her makeup, but her smile is as serene as a marble saint's. "Wasn't your place, Jay; she's my baby. I'll fry for shooting him if I have to. Don't got no regrets."

"Still," he says. "You should have let me handle it. I wouldn't have got caught."

Her smile's more like herself this time. "I do love you, sweetheart."

He slides his fingers through the chicken-wire to grip her hand as best he can. "Mae, you're a damn fool."

She knows him well enough to hear what he's trying to say.

***

Mae's husband is a mousy little man named Jake who ain't held down a full-time job since he started drinking back in '87. Mostly, Jay don't have much use for the guy, but he heads over to see how he's doing anyhow.

Jake's already three sheets to the wind when Jay gets there, red-eyed and weepy, and it turns out to be Nellie who sits down with him at

the picnic table out in front of the double-wide and talks it out. Her fingers are splinted and there's still bruises on her neck from where Big Eddie grabbed her out behind Rocky's last week. Five days since she come home from the hospital, four days since Mae walked into the backroom of the Quick-Fill where Eddie was stocking beer and put a .12 gauge slug in his face, and here she is, shucking corn efficiently and talking about how they're gonna get money together for a lawyer.

"You know I'll help out as much as I can," Jay says.

"Mama said you'd say that," she says. Her voice is all raspy. "Said you got a heart too big for your chest."

"Your mama's a fine woman," Jay says back.

"Yeah." She laughs, mirthlessly. "I'm trying to be sorry she's in jail, but I'm too damn glad that son of a bitch is dead."

Back when he first came home, after the Corps, after Keith, he used to come by here to sit at this picnic table with Mae. She didn't try to make him talk, didn't ask nothing of him, just let him sit. It was Nellie who'd come out and chatter at him in those days, nine years old and bold as brass. Always came out to show him her dollies or her math homework or the picture she was working on that day. There was a hole in his heart then that wouldn't never heal--still hasn't--but that little girl took just a little bit of the ache away.

And now she's sitting there with bruises on her neck and empty eyes, and there's a part of Jay that wants to dig Eddie up and pump a few more rounds into his carcass. "Yeah, honey," he says. "Me too."

***

Jay don't take the newspaper, usually, which is why he don't find out until late the next night that both the crime-scene cleaup guys at the Quick-Fill dropped dead of heart attacks at the same time. Marty hands the paper over the bar, taps on the headline with one gnarled finger like Jay might miss it otherwise. "Ain't that something?"

"It's something, alright."

"Both their hearts just stopped," Marty says, nodding sagely. "Not a mark on them. Damn strange, if you ask me."

"Wasn't asking," Jay says sourly. If he had a lick of sense, he'd just head home now. Temper he's in, all it'll take is just one push to set him off.

"You gotta admit, it ain't normal."

"Sure."

"Maybe it was some kind of gas leak or poison or something. You were in the service, Jay, you ever hear of anything that could do that?"

Jay shakes his head and digs in the pocket of his flannel button-down for his smokes, and that's when Earl drops onto the seat next to him. There's a sheen of sweat on his forehead in spite of the chill outside, and from the smell of him it's been a few days since he's bathed.

"Sure," he says slurrily. "He was in the service. Until they kicked him out for bein' a cocksucker faggot, ain't that right?"

Jay takes out a cigarette and lights it, sucks down a mouthful of bitter smoke and blows it back out again without looking at him.

Earl bangs a fist on the bar and points at Marty, bleary-eyed. "Boy, you gonna get me another beer?"

"I don't think so," Marty says mildly without looking up from the glass he's wiping. Man's as easy-going as they come; he's been running this place since Jay was fifteen and Jay's never once seen him lose his temper. "Y'all feel free to come on back when you can walk a straight line. I'm cutting you off."

"The fuck is this shit," Earl mutters. "Some fuckin' country we live in, huh? Man can't even get a beer to drink to his buddy what some bitch went and shot. Shot right in the goddamn face, and why? Huh?" He grabs Jay's wrist. "Why d'you think, queerboy?"

"I think you better get your hand off me," Jay tells him.

"Or what?" He leans in closer, boozy breath in Jay's face. "What the fuck are you gonna do about it? You gonna shoot me like that bitch shot Eddie, huh?"

With his free hand, Jay takes the cigarette out of his mouth and drives

the lit end into the web of skin between Earl's thumb and forefinger. For a second, Earl just gapes at him, and then he yelps and tries to snatch his hand back. Quick as a snake, Jay grabs his wrist, crushes the cigarette into his skin until it goes out. He can smell burning flesh by the time he lets go.

"Next time I tell you to keep your hands off me, you keep your fucking hands off me," he says, sliding off his barstool. Earl clutches his hand and makes a small angry, frightened noise that Jay likes more than he wants to. Behind the bar, Marty is studiously ignoring them both. "I'll see you around, Marty."

***

He drinks himself to sleep that night, and when he finally does drop off he hears the echo of gunfire rattling in his ears all night long.

The next morning, Andy Wilson slips off a ladder at the Quick-Fill and breaks his neck.

***

Sam has perfected the art of the awkward silence, Dean thinks, watching the tires of Dad's truck kick up dust on the highway in front of them. He gave up on conversation and cranked up the music about two hundred miles back, and he can still hear Sam's stubborn silence filling up the spaces between Lars Ulrich banging his way through *Enter Sandman*. Should have just let Sammy ride with Dad. Maybe then the pair of them could just duke it out and get it over with.

Yeah, and maybe that'd be a good way for him to wind up cleaning blood off the dash of the truck. When they're like this, it's like having a couple of pissed off bulls butting heads all over the place. Freaking exhausting.

Oh, hell with it. He reaches out and turns down the music. "Look, Sammy, I know you were really stoked about that debate team thing--"

"It's Sam, not Sammy," his brother snaps without looking away from the window. There's a book open on his lap, but he hasn't been reading it. "And yeah, I was really *stoked*. Some of us actually care

about our futures."

Okay, so maybe it isn't sharing and caring time just yet.

"Whatever, dude," Dean says, and turns the music back up. Sam slaps his book closed and turns it down again.

"You know, this isn't fair," he says. "This is not freaking fair. I had two weeks left of my junior year. *Two weeks."*

"Oh, come on. Don't start this now."

"I just want to have a *life,* Dean! I had friends. I had a spot on the debate team. We were gonna go to States, and now they're*screwed*. Because of me."

"Not to mention that sweet little redhead you were all over," Dean says, trying to interject a note of humor into the proceedings.

Of course, it's Sam, so he fails miserably. Christ. Dean's met priests who are more fun. "Her name is Cynthia, and she had a boyfriend. And that's not the point."

"Oh, no? What is the point, then?"

"The point is that just once I want to be able to join a team without worrying about whether or not I'm going to leave them in the lurch. Just once, I'd like to be able to finish up a year at one school and not have to take summer classes so I don't get held back. Do you have any idea how hard it's going to be for me to get into a decent college as it is?"

College. That's a word Sam's been tossing around a lot lately, and it always makes Dean's gut twist with a cold fear that he doesn't want to put a name to. "Dude, I know you're upset and everything, but this is a little more important than debate tournaments, you know? People are dying, here."

"People are always dying," Sam mutters. "I just don't see why we're the ones who always have to drop everything and fix it."

And yeah, that's pretty much vintage Sam, right there. "I do not want to have this conversation with you again, okay?"

"Fine." Sam flips his book back open and glares at the page. "Take Dad's side. Just like always."

I'm not taking sides, you self-centered little prick, Dean thinks, but it's not entirely true so he doesn't say it out loud.

He lets the silence stretch out for five miles before he turns the music up again.

***

The sun's reached and passed the crown of the sky by the time they follow Dad off the exit for Canfield. It takes ten miles of winding backroad to get into town, and when they're finally driving down Main Street, Dean has to chuckle a little. It's been almost two years, and it doesn't look like a single thing has changed. There was a rainstorm a little earlier, and the pavement is still damp, the tin roofs still shiny with water. He rolls down the window, breathes deep the smell of clean, wet air and woodsmoke.

"Hey, Sammy, there's Lawler's," he says, as they drive past. Same faded neon sign, same newspaper clippings plastered in the fly-spotted windows. "Remember Mae?"

Sam shuts his book again and glances up, blinking and irritable. "I remember how you used to scam her into giving us extra junk food."

"Hey, that was for your benefit. You were a growing boy." Dean grins a little, offers a truce. "Course, if I knew you were going to turn into the Jolly Green Giant, I might have just let you starve."

Sam rolls his eyes and mumbles something that sounds vaguely like profanity, but he's smiling reluctantly. Dean's counting this as a win.

"You think Jay's still around?" Sam asks as they turn the corner onto Whitehorn Road.

Dean shrugs like it doesn't matter to him one way or another. Sam's pretty much always been able to see through him, but it's all about keeping up appearances. "Guess we'll see."

The garage is halfway up the road, where the plowed fields circling the town begin to give way to half-green trees. There's a new sign out

front and it looks like the cruddy siding has been replaced, but other than that the place doesn't look much different. More importantly, there's Jay's beat-up red pickup parked around the side.

"He's still here," Dean says with some satisfaction, and taps the horn to get Dad's attention.

***

"Think it's cursed," Mike says from the garage door. Jay's on his back under a VW Bug that's older than he is, up to his elbows in its metal guts. "On account of Eddie, you know?"

"I am absolutely sure that you can find something to do besides standing there flapping your jaw," Jay calls.

"Come on, boss--"

"If you're that bored, I got a stack of paperwork in the office that needs doing."

"Okay," Mike says. "I'm going, I'm going."

He sounds sulky, but he's moving away in the direction of the back lot. Probably gonna go sneak a smoke with George and bitch about the boss, but as long as he's doing it out of earshot Jay honestly can't bring himself to give a damn.

He has about five minutes of merciful silence before he hears two sets of footsteps crossing the shop floor. Heading straight for him by the sound of it; probably customers who ain't supposed to be back here. If George don't pull his head out of his ass sometimes soon and start minding the desk, he's gonna get himself fired.

The steps stop by the driver's side, and when Jay rolls his head over to look he sees two sets of battered work boots and frayed denim hems. "Just hang on a minute, let me get this clamped," he says. "Be right with you."

"Take your time," says one of the men. "Not in any big hurry."

"Good," Jay grunts, tightening the hose clamp.

"That's Jay under there, isn't it?" asks the other man, and Jay's hand stills. He knows that voice from somewhere.

"Yeah." He gives the clamp another crank and shimmies out from under the chassis, braces himself against the Bug's gleaming chrome fender as he stands. "Do I--"

That's when he catches sight of them, and he shuts up. He don't know the older of the two, a big, dark man with heavy brows and haunted eyes and a set to his shoulders that says career military. The younger one, though--well, damn. It's Dean.

He looks good. Got a couple more inches of height on him, some muscle, filling out the promise of strength in those broad shoulders. He's grown into his face too, ain't so pretty now it makes a man feel indecent just to look at him, but those eyes, wide and green and full of wicked humor, are just the same. So's the voice. "Jay, man. Good to see you."

"No kidding," Jay says, and he knows he sounds kind of stunned but he can't quite help it. "Kid, I was starting to think I'd seen the last of you."

"Yeah, well, I'm like a bad penny." He gestures to the man standing next to him, watching Jay with an unreadable expression. "This is my dad. John Winchester."

"Pleasure to meet you," says Jay, and sticks his hand out. For a minute, he's not sure Winchester's gonna shake it, but then he does, broad palm dry and calloused.

"Likewise." His voice has some gravel in it, the older, tireder echo of Dean's. "Heard you gave my boys a hand a few years back."

"Was going through a rough spot with the shop," says Jay easily. "They picked up some of the slack for a few weeks. Did me a favor." It's pure bullshit and he's pretty sure both Dean and his daddy know it, but until he comes up with a better story he's sticking to it. "So, what brings you through town?"

They glance at each other. It's the kind of look that's full of conversation outsiders can't read, and when Dean looks back at him his disarming smile is just as full of shit as Jay's was a second ago. "Just passing through, figured my car's overdue for an oil change," he

says. "Wouldn't trust it to another soul."

"Right kind of you," Jay says, like he don't remember the way Dean used to badmouth the customers who couldn't even change their own damn oil.

Dean and his daddy glance at each other again, and then Winchester Senior nods abruptly. "I'll bring the car around front. Maybe we can go grab a beer after you finish. Give you two a chance to catch up."

"Sounds fine," Jay says warily, wiping his hands on the rag he keeps in his back pocket. Definitely something going on there. Ain't his business any which way, but he can't help wondering while he follows the pair of them out the door.

It's sunny outside, a clean, crisp kind of sunny that makes the strip of damp road and the new leaves on the trees outside look like something out of a movie. The air's still wet from the rain that passed over earlier, and Jay closes his eyes, breathes deep. He's been tasting the memory of gun-smoke and dust all day, leftovers from his nightmares.

"So," Dean says, and he opens his eyes. John's crossing the lot toward a gleaming black Impala, but Dean's still standing there, squinting a little in the light. He looks thoughtful.

"So," Jay says back.

"You didn't need the help back then."

"Nope. You don't need me to change your oil for you."

Dean's smile crinkles the corners of his eyes. "Fair enough."

"Beautiful car." He nods at the Impala rumbling slowly across the gravel lot. She puts all the other pieces of junk around here to shame even if she is about as old as Jay. Car like that takes some love to keep looking so fine.

"Yeah, she's a family heirloom."

John parks the car around front, cuts the engine. The shotgun side door swings open, and a lanky form unfolds itself from the seat. It's Sam, of course. Kid's even taller than Jay remembers, hair flopping in

his eyes, hardcover book clutched defensively to his chest. John snaps something at him and he replies in a sullen monotone, hauls a giant duffel bag out and slings it over his shoulder.

Dean aims an apologetic smile in Jay's direction. "I better go run interference."

Jay shrugs, watches him go slide between his father and brother with the same easy grin he used at the pool tables when they first met. He gets Sam moving in the direction of a big black truck that's parked at the edge of the lot, puts his head in close to say something in his daddy's ear, then steps back. Jay decides that's about the right time for him to go hunt down an oil filter and see if George fell in the creek out back and drowned.

When he gets under the Impala, it's just like he expected. She's about a thousand miles shy of needing an oil change, but he does it anyway, waves off the twenty Dean tries to pay him with. Looks like he has a more solid source of income than he did the last time Jay knew him, but he can't quite shake off the memory of that scrawny kid with old clothes and hungry eyes.

"You can buy me a beer," he says, locking up the front door. Mike's already heading out, but George is still hanging sullenly around the front stoop, waiting for his ride. Don't seem to recognize Dean, or if he does, he don't say anything.

"Okay," Dean says, and damn if that smile isn't even more of a killer now than it was two years ago. Jay catches John watching him, something a lot like suspicion in his dark eyes, and he looks away, focuses on digging his truck keys out of his pocket.

***

Rocky's is dim and smoky, country music twanging away on the jukebox, neon signs flickering in the blacked-out windows, that damn moose-head still hanging over the bar. Dean vaguely recognizes the little balding black guy with a face like a walnut who's wiping down the grimy countertop with an equally grimy rag. Marty.

"Man," he says, letting the door swing shut behind him. "This place is just as classy as I remember."

Dad cuts him a look under his brows. "What were you boys doing

hanging around a bar while I was gone?"

Dean winces, opens his mouth to start explaining, and Sam cuts him off. "He was earning our *rent money,* Dad."

"Boy, don't test me--"

"I'm going to go finish my book, if you don't mind. Sir." Only Sam could make that come out like an insult. Dad's brows draw down, but before he can answer, Sam's turning on his heel and stalking across the bar on those long stork-legs. He settles himself in a corner booth, back pointedly turned.

Dean sighs. "I'll talk to him."

"Tell him he's doing extra laps for his attitude, while you're at it," Dad says irritably as they approach the bar.

"Yessir."

Jay's already sitting, talking to Marty and politely ignoring their little family drama. Dean tunes in to the conversation in time to hear Marty say, "...gonna rough up any of my customers tonight?"

"Hadn't planned on it," Jay says, but he's looking over at a couple of guys clustered over at the other end of the bar, and there's something ugly in his voice.

Marty sighs. "You never do. Just do me a favor and watch yourself, would you? Mae's a friend of mine too, but if you start another ruckus, I will toss you out on your ass."

"I got it," Jay says. "You done?"

"Yeah, I'm done." Marty's eyes flicker over Dean without recognition, rest briefly on Dad. Assessing the potential threat; Dean's seen plenty of bartenders look at Dad that way. Lately, he's been getting those kind of looks himself, which he finds more flattering than he probably should. Better than the alternative, anyway. "What can I get y'all?"

"Three Coors," Dean says, pulling out his wallet. "And a root beer for Princess over there."

He leaves Dad with Jay to bring the soda over to Sam. Dad gives him

a look for that. They're here on a job, after all, and Dean's the one who knows Jay, has a better chance of getting him to talk if he's seen anything weird. Dean knows that. He does.

But Jay was good to him back in the day, and it feels vaguely unethical to sweet-talk him into spilling his guts. And anyway, if he doesn't jolly Sam out of his snit, it's going to be freaking unbearable at the motel tonight.

"Got you a soda, bitch," he says, sliding into the booth across from Sam.

Sam looks up, shakes his bangs out of his eyes. He needs a haircut. Dean's pretty sure redheaded-Cynthia-with-a-boyfriend told him she liked it long, which is why he hasn't cut it in four months. "Thanks."

"Yeah, don't mention it." Dean glances over at the bar. Dad and Jay are talking, and it even looks relatively civil. "You're doing extra laps tonight, by the way."

"Freaking boot-camp," Sam mutters. "You know, some people play baseball on Friday nights. Go out to a movie. Hang out at the county fair."

"You watch too much daytime TV." Sam ignores him in favor of a sullen slurp of soda, and he sighs. "Fine, I'll do the extra laps with you. That make you happy?"

"No." Sam gives him half of a smile, an instant of sweet little Sammy breaking through the shell of sulky rebellion. "But thanks."

"Yeah, no problem." He slides out of the booth, ruffles Sam's hair and dodges the halfhearted swat Sam aims at him as he crosses back over.

"...true enough," Dad is saying. He cocks an eyebrow at Dean, and Dean shakes his head minutely before sliding into the seat next to Jay.

"You're talking about me," he says, picking up the unclaimed beer from the bar. "I can tell. It's because I'm so handsome, isn't it?"

"Don't be an asshole," Dad growls. Dean grins at Jay, and maybe he's leaning in a little closer than he needs to, but Jay doesn't seem to mind and if Dad notices, he keeps it to himself.

"I get my good looks from my old man."

"You're gonna get a beat-down from your old man if you're not careful."

"My winning personality, too." He lifts his beer to his mouth, nonchalant. "So. Jay. How's life?"

"Same old," Jay says blandly. "Small town. Not much changes."

"Heard a guy got himself blown away last week."

"Yup."

"You know him?"

"Wish I didn't." Jay pulls out a pack of smokes, lights one up, glances at Dean. "Big Eddie. Y'all broke a pool cue on his face last time you were in town."

Oh, yeah. Him. Edward VanKampp was Big Eddie, the dirtbag. Dean grimaces. "I remember."

"He was a sorry sonovabitch, if you want the truth. Not many decent folks gonna be sad he's dead."

"Yeah, I'm not surprised." He watches Jay blows out another mouthful of smoke. The smell of it is making him crave a cigarette like he hasn't in years. "What happened?"

Jay's pale eyes are quietly appraising in the dim light. "You remember Mae Warner." It's not a question.

Sweet Mae, with the fluffy blonde hair and the long red fingernails, the drunk husband and the smile that must have made her look like Marilyn Monroe when she was fifteen years younger. "Yeah."

"'Bout two weeks ago her little girl was in here. Little Nellie." His lip curls. "Eddie caught her out in the parking lot. She wouldn't say what he done, but it ain't hard to guess. Mae shot him. She's at the county lockup now."

"Shit," Dean murmurs. He met Nellie once, maybe--there's a vague impression of flyaway hair and coltish legs and dimples. She'd be

about Sam's age now. And he wishes he could say he's surprised, but, well. He remembers Big Eddie. No kid should have to go through that.

Jay nods once, abruptly. "Can't say I'm sorry for the bastard."

"Yeah, me neither." On Jay's other side, Dad's staring off into space, apparently lost in the dulcet tones of Lynyrd Skynyrd, but Dean can read the crease between his brows, the impatient way he's tapping his fingers against his knee. Time to stop fucking around and get down to business. He can worry about Mae and her daughter after they gank whatever's doing this. "That, uh, happened at the gas station, didn't it?"

"Yup."

"Last Saturday?"

"That's right."

"A couple other people died there since then, too, I heard."

"Been a few strange accidents, yeah."

"So, you been by there lately?"

"The gas station?"

"Yeah."

"Reckon I stopped by there a time or two. It's closed for now. Folks think it's haunted, or something." Jay's voice is so dry that if Dean didn't know better he'd swear the guy knows what was going on. Or knows that something is going on, anyway, which isn't actually impossible. Jay's a sharp bastard, in his quiet way.

"Haunted, huh?" He tries out a smile. It feels a little wooden on his face. Normally, this is the point where he starts getting funny looks from a mark, and, normally, that isn't something that bothers him too much. "So, you notice anything weird when you were there?"

"Like what?"

Dean opens his mouth, and Dad cuts in, smooth as if they rehearsed. "Cold spots, shorts in the wiring, that kind of thing. Anything

unusual."

Jay takes another thoughtful drag on his cigarette, runs a hand through hair that's even shaggier than it was the last time Dean saw him. There's a tension in him that isn't familiar, but Dean's trying not to read too much into that. It's not like they knew each other all that long, after all, and it was years ago. "Can't say as I have." For an instant, his pale gaze is on Dean, strangely intense, and then it slides past as a few sets of heavy footsteps approach the bar behind him. "And I'd best be going now. Thanks for the beer."

"Don't mention it," Dean murmurs as Jay sets down his half-full bottle and gets to his feet. That gets him a brief, sharp smile, and then Jay stubs out his cigarette and heads for the door.

The two guys who just came up behind Dean are vaguely, unpleasantly familiar. The fatter, balder one has a bandage wrapped around his right hand, and he's glaring at Jay's retreating back. When his hostile gaze shifts to Dean, Dean gives him the widest and most insincere smile in his repertoire and returns his attention to his beer while Dad strikes up a conversation with Marty.

***

It turns out that Marty has a hell of a lot more to say about the deaths at the gas station than Jay did. Dean knows he should be focused, getting involved in the conversation, but his attention keeps wandering, and after the third time Dad has to jog his knee to get his attention, he sets down his beer, aims an apologetic smile at Marty and a shrug at Dad. "Kinda tired. I'm gonna head back to the motel and take a nap."

"You do that," Dad says. There's a warning in his voice, too--*pull your head outta your ass before we go on the hunt*, and Dean nods acknowledgment, heads over to the back to collect Sam.

***

There's only one motel in Canfield, a long, low white-washed brick building with spools of old flypaper dangling over the lobby entrance. It's off the highway, tucked in deep between two tree-studded hills with a long, winding road spooling out beyond it. Perfect for a jog,

and even Sam lays off the bitching after a couple of miles, matches the rhythm of his longer legs to Dean's as they loop around to start heading back. The sun's sinking low in the sky by the time they throw themselves down on the soggy strip of grass outside their room. Dad's back; through the window Dean can see him hunched over one of Bobby's books, and he leans back on his elbows, stares up at the shreds of orange and pink striping the blue sky, breathes deep the taste of darkening air, for an instant completely content.

"So, Jay," Sam says, ruining the moment. Dean glances over at him. He's looking up at the sky, too, but he hasn't quite mastered the poker face and there's clearly something significant going on behind those raised brows.

"Yeah," Dean says cautiously.

"Did he know anything?"

"Nah." He already mentioned Mae and her little girl in the car, which got a good twenty minutes of outraged ranting from Sam. "Nothing about any evil ghosts, anyway."

"Hm."

"What?"

"Nothing."

Dean stares at him a little more, but he's affecting the innocent look that works like a charm on teachers and social workers and not at all on Dean. Whatever. If he doesn't want to pursue this particular line of questioning any further, Dean is not going to push him.

The door creaks open, then shut, and then Dad's standing over them. "You boys get geared up," he says, tucking his sawed-off into its holster. "Gas station's closed down, so I want to get over there by nightfall. See if we can't figure out what's going down there before anybody else gets hurt."

"Yessir." Dean scrambles to his feet, reaches down to give Sam a hand up. "But it's probably just a ghost, right? I mean, with the guy getting shot right there--"

"Most likely," Dad says. "But don't go getting overconfident. It's a good

way to get yourself killed."

Dean grins. "Yessir."

***

Jay wakes out of a deep sleep, chilled for no reason he can put a name to. He rolls, reaching for the bedside lamp, and between one breath and the next danger hits him, ringing through the air like a silent gong. It's been years, but the reflexes are still there and he rolls off the bed, hits the floor hard on one hip and elbow and reaches for the .12 gauge he keeps in a soft case there. It's loaded. His hands pump and thumb the safety without him even thinking about it, and then he's sitting on the floor in his boxers, wildly swinging a gun at an empty room.

Except that it ain't empty. There's a flicker, a flash of movement by the window. A thing coming into being, impossibly, out of thin air. Jay fires before he gets a good look at whatever the hell it is, but it blows apart like a wisp of fog, leaving him sitting there, breathing in gunsmoke and staring at the broken window.

Well, hell. Good thing it ain't too cold out.

He blinks hard, gets slowly to his feet, bad knee popping. Keeps the gun up while he scans the dark room, but he's pretty sure there ain't really anything there. It's not the first time he's shot up his room half-asleep. Sometimes nightmares don't know when to stay in his head.

The room's empty, bare walls sketched with the shadows of the trees outside, broken glass glittering in the moonlight. Smoke hangs heavy in the air, and Jay swears, sets the gun down, and goes looking for a broom.

He gets most of the glass cleaned up, duct-tapes a slab of cardboard over the broken window until he can head down to the hardware store tomorrow, then sits down on the bed and runs a hand over his face. Should just put the gun someplace else, especially with him so on edge lately, but it's been years since he could sleep without having some kind of weapon in arm's reach.

The sudden shrill sound that splits the air makes his hands twitch involuntarily, but it's just his phone. He closes his eyes and picks up,

feeling suddenly ancient. "Yeah?"

"Jay? Jay, is that you? Jay, oh my God, please, something's happening, you gotta get over here--"

It's Nellie, and she sounds scared out of her goddamn mind.

"Nellie. Honey, what happened?"

She lets out a long sob. *"I think I'm goin' crazy, Jay. I think I'm going honest-to-God crazy. There's somebody out there and I called the police but they said ain't no one there and Missy won't stop crying and Daddy's drunk and I just--I didn't know who else to call, I'm sorry--"*

Christ, this is just what he needs.

"It's okay," Jay tells her, soothing as he can. He locates the jeans he wore yesterday, crumpled in a heap on the floor, and pulls them on one-handed. "It's okay, sweetheart. "You just sit tight, all right? I'll be right over there."

***

The gas station is a complete fucking dud. Figures. If Dean didn't know better, he'd swear the EMF meter was busted; there's not a twitch, nothing, not even when they scan the backroom where it happened. Room's still got crime scene tape draped all over the place, shattered beer bottles and a spray of dried blood and brain matter fanning the concrete wall. Sam grimaces queasily, and Dad scans the room, professional and indifferent to the gore.

Dean has to force down a sudden surge of fierce pride. They get rid of this spook, he's gonna head over to county lockup and bust Mae out or something. Hard to believe she had it in her.

"Focus," Dad rumbles, low and admonishing, and Dean looks back down at the EMF meter.

"Nothing in here. Not a twitch."

"You sure it's working?"

"Yeah," Dean says, offended. "I'm sure. Maybe it's just not here."

Dad jerks his chin at the front room, where moonlight spills across the linoleum floor and reflects on the glass cases. "Check again."

Out of the corner of his eye, Dean can see Sam pulling the bitchface, but at least he has the sense to keep his mouth shut. He can be an ornery little brat, that's for damn sure, but no matter what else you can say about him, he gets his head out of his ass and pulls his weight when there's a hunt on, no exceptions.

The neon signs are all off; the only light in the front room is from the blinking smoke detector, the exit sign over the doors, the moon outside. There's not a blip of EMF. No ozone in the air, nothing.

Dean's starting to get a bad feeling about this.

"It's clean," he tells Dad when they meet by the back door.

Sam's doing a sweep of the parking lot, gangly shadow spilling across the pavement and looking caught between absurd and dangerous with his .45 held low and tight in one hand. He's gonna be one scary dude when he grows into his height, Dean thinks, but right now he just looks like an overgrown stork. He checks around the back door, then jogs across the parking lot to them, gigantic sneakers slapping on the pavement. "Nothing."

"It's been, what, a week?" Dean says when Dad makes an irritated noise in the back of his throat. "Three people are already dead. Maybe when they closed up shop, he decided to take his business elsewhere. You think Mae?"

Dad runs a hand through his hair, glances around the empty lot, nods. "She's in the county jail. We can't get in there on such short notice." He closes his eyes, considering, and Dean bites back a protest. Dad's right. Maybe with a couple of days to establish a cover story, but not like this. "Okay," Dad says abruptly. "Nothing we can do about your friend, but he still might go after the daughter. You head over there, hold him off if he shows up. I'll take Sam, head over to the funeral home and take care of the body."

Sam's head lifts, and Dean can see the arguments already forming in his mouth. He gives Dad a quick nod before Sam can let any of them out. "Yessir."

"And Dean?"

"Yeah?"

"Be careful."

Dean grins, pockets the EMF meter. "Always am."

As he starts across lot to where the Impala is discreetly parked behind a clump of bushes, he can almost hear Dad rolling his eyes.

***

The drive over to Mae's place ain't long enough to get him too wound up, but Jay's still tense and fidgety by the time he pulls his truck in next to the old rustbucket Nellie drives to school. The lights are on in the kitchen and nothing seems off, but Nellie sounded downright terrified on the phone, and she's a kid who don't spook easy. Even after everything.

He pulls his shotgun off the gun rack, loads it by feel, kicks the truck door shut behind him, eyes peeled and ears pricked as he crosses the wet yard. There's nothing moving, just the wind in the trees and the sound of an owl hooting someplace in the woods.

A dark shape darts between two trees, and his gun comes up, slippery in his fingers.

All his instincts warn him to *shoot now, shoot now before he knows you're here,* but he forces them down. He caught the guy before he could get to the trailer, and that's the important part. This ain't Kuwait. Let the police handle it.

'Course, if he can make it a little easier on them, he ain't averse to that. The guy must have heard his truck coming up the drive, but he don't seem to realize he's been made. Jay can see the dark shape of him against an old oak, profile outlined in moonlight. He's looking the other way.

He can be quiet when he has to, and the soft grass muffles sound well enough that the guy doesn't hear him coming until it's almost too late. He's got good reflexes, Jay'll give him that much. His arm comes up as he turns, blocks the butt of the gun coming down on his head, fingers

gripping to twist it out of Jay's hands. He tosses it aside, blocks Jay's uppercut with one solid forearm. The next blow lands, though, and the guy lets out a grunt as Jay shoves him against the tree, forearm to his throat. "Woah. Shit. Okay, stop."

The shock of his voice is enough to get Jay to back off, blinking. The guy shakes his head, takes one careful step forward out of the shadow, hands up. It's Dean.

Jay shakes his head like he's clearing water out of his ears. "What the hell are you doing?"

"This is totally not what it looks like," Dean says earnestly, hands still raised. There's a trickle of blood coming from his mouth. Jay must've split his lip with that last punch.

"Yeah? 'Cause it looks like you're trespassing on my good friend's property and scaring the hell out of her family."

Dean winces, gives Jay a hopeful little smile that he ignores as hard as he can. "Okay, *that* part is what it looks like. I swear, I'm not gonna hurt anybody. The opposite, in fact."

Jay folds his arms. "Start talking."

"Okay, so this is gonna sound completely crazy," Dean says, lifting one hand to rub the back of his neck sheepishly. For a second, he looks just like the kid Jay's never known him to be, more awkward than dangerous. "Look. Um. We think--*I*think--there's something weird going on around here, and I just wanted to check it out, okay?"

He tacks another hopeful smile on the end, like that's gonna make up for him lurking around Mae's front yard in the middle of the night and making no goddamn sense whatsoever.

"Right," Jay says dryly.

"It's Big Eddie. I mean, it wouldn't be the first time he went after her, right?"

"Eddie's dead, I promise you that. Ain't going after anybody nowadays."

Dean don't even wince. "Yeah, I saw the gas station. Blood and brains

all over the walls, I know. It's his ghost that's been killing people. You gotta admit there's something weird about it--" Jay opens his mouth, but that just makes Dean talk faster "--three people dying of unrelated causes in a week? In one place? But then they closed it down and he wasn't there, so we thought maybe--maybe he was gonna come after Nellie again."

"You scared the hell out of her," Jay says, 'cause that's easier to deal with than the fact that the kid's apparently lost his mind. "Lurking out here. She called me 'cause she was scared, and believe me, that child's been through enough already."

That gets Dean's attention in a way none of his other protests have. "Wait, what?"

"You heard me."

"No, I mean--shit." Dean runs a hand over his face. "Jay, I swear to God, I got here five minutes before you did. I haven't been doing anything but watching. If she heard somebody out here, it wasn't me."

Chapter 3

Jay looks tense and suspicious, edging into genuinely pissed off, and Dean bites back a sigh. Seriously, this is the problem with getting close to people. Once you do, it starts to *matter* when they think you're a crazed sociopath. Or a insensitive douchebag of a Peeping Tom, whatever. "Look," he starts. "I'm not--"

The sudden, sinking chill is his only warning, and he barely has time to think *oh, fuck* before he's flying through the air. He hits the cold ground hard, impact rattling through his skull. And god *damn* it, he lost his grip on the gun and now there's a bulky shape materializing out of shreds of fog a few yards away.

It's been a few years since he saw Big Eddie, but the son of a bitch was pretty memorable. He looks about the same, shapeless jeans and saggy t-shirt, ball-cap pulled down over his heavy brow. The bloody hole between his eyes is new, though.

To his left, Jay bites out a curse, brings his shotgun up and fires. It's a beautiful shot, straight through the middle of the dead redneck's ugly face. Too bad his gun's just loaded with lead shot; Eddie shudders a little as it passes through him, but makes no move to disappear.

Gun. Fuck, where's his gun? Dad's gonna *kill* him--

Jay gets off another shot, and then he's flying through the air too, hitting a nearby oak with a thunk that makes Dean wince. And great, just when he thought this couldn't get worse, the trailer door opens. From this angle, he can see a slender shape silhouetted against the kitchen light, but no details. Must be Nellie, coming out to see what all the noise is about.

"Are you nuts?" Dean yells. "Get back inside!"

The ghost is already spinning back to him and he chokes on the rest of the words, but at least the door slams shut again. As long as the dumb kid doesn't come running out here--

"I 'member you."

Thing about the undead is that they can make even Big Eddie's slurry half-drunk talk sound eerie. The fact that his eyes look like they've

been scooped out and replaced with shriveled raisins doesn't help matters, either.

"Yeah," Dean says, keeping his voice light as he scans the yard frantically for his gun. "I'm a memorable guy."

"You scammed me."

"You really know how to hold a grudge, you know that?" Fuck, fuck, *fuck.*

"I don't like cheaters," the ghost whispers, stutter-stepping closer, head cocked. It's attention is totally on Dean now; out of the corner of his eye he can see Jay collapse into a heap at the base of the tree.

"Yeah, well, I don't like dumb-as-a-rock rapists with lousy hygiene, so I'd say we're even."

A glint of moonlight out of the corner of his eye, and thank fucking *Christ,* that's his shotgun, buried in the overgrown grass just out of reach. He rolls toward it, arm stretching, face half-squashed in the dirt, and his fingers are just brushing the stock when the ghost is suddenly a whole lot closer, looming over him.

His hands feel like lead weights, his skin too heavy for his body. Big Eddie leans his bleeding, blank-eyed face right down in Dean's space, blocking out the sky, and Dean thinks, dazedly, *oh, shit, I'm gonna die looking at this ugly motherfucker--*

"Hey, Eddie, you fat fuck."

What the hell?

"Come on, you dumb, sorry asshole." It's *Jay,* the stupid son of a bitch, still slumped against the tree where he landed, and if he's scared at all, he's doing a good job of hiding it under a thick layer of pissed off. "Come on, you chickenshit bastard. You like to fuck around with kids? Why don't you try fucking with me? Come on. I'm right here."

You stupid asshole, Dean thinks, but the icy lassitude is lifting from his limbs, the ghost's face turned away, and with those pit-black eyes off of him, he finds that he can move. The gun slides into his fingers and he doesn't even bother trying to stand, just pumps an iron slug straight up. The recoil knocks him back in the dirt, hard.

Big Eddie disappears. Dean manages to get his feet under him, makes it almost all the way up to a standing position before there's another icy blast of air behind him and he spins, fires again.

It's like playing that goddamn gopher game, is what it is. Hit them once, they just pop up somewhere else. He chambers another round, braces the shotgun against his shoulder and scans the yard, eyes straining in the dim light. Under the tree, Jay's struggling to his feet, shadows carved into the spare lines of his face, pale hair disheveled without his customary baseball cap.

"Come out, come out wherever you are," Dean murmurs. "Come on out and let me take a shot at you, you big ugly fucker."

If he can keep Eddie busy here, maybe the bastard will stay the hell away from the jail. Hopefully. Hopefully Dad and Sam will take care of the body before he runs out of ammo, too.

"I know you're listening. Come on, you scared? I kicked your ass last time, I can do it again."

Still nothing.

"Too much of a pussy to duke it out? You always gotta go after little girls? Of course, Mae kinda got the jump on you, didn't--"

Oh, yeah, that did the trick. A wall of cold hits Dean so hard that for a second he could swear that his eyeballs are freeze-drying in his face, and the ghost explodes furiously into being.

"SHE KILLED ME!"

The only reason he doesn't go flying is that he's braced for it, and even so it's a near thing. Rage crackles off the spirit like lightning, raising the hair on the back of Dean's neck. He swings the shotgun up, fires. The round hits Eddie in the shoulder and his outline goes fuzzy for an instant, but then he shakes his head and advances, head down, bull shoulders and blood sliding down his face. Fuck. Maybe this wasn't the best tactical decision after all. That spook is *pissed.*

He takes a step back, leading it away from the trailer and Jay, pumping the shotgun and swearing under his breath. Before he can fire again, the ghost stops, suddenly, rears back up to its full height,

face rippling, and bursts into a column of flame.

It screams once, raw and inhuman, and then it's gone.

"Good timing, guys," Dean mutters. "Really, really freaking good timing. Thanks." He means it to come out sarcastic, but he's a little too relieved.

Jay pushes himself away from the tree, takes a couple of steps that are wobbly enough to make Dean wonder if he's got a concussion. When he speaks, though, his voice is remarkably calm. "So."

Dean grins at him, giddy with the leftover adrenaline. "So."

"Reckon you ain't crazy after all."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that," Dean says, lowering his gun. "How's your head?"

Jay grimaces, reaches up to feel the back of his skull. His long fingers come away dark with blood in the moonlight. "Not so good."

"Want me to take a look?"

"Is that son of a bitch coming back?"

"Eddie? Nah, he's toast. Fucking finally."

"Good." Jay nods, then winces. "We oughta let Nellie know we ain't dead. Poor kid must be scared out of her mind."

"Oh," Dean says. "Right." He watches Jay take a couple more staggering steps toward the trailer, then crosses the space between them and offers his shoulder. Jay only hesitates for a second before leaning into Dean's supporting arm, all lean muscle, wire and whipcord. He smells like Marlboros and cool night air. Not that Dean's paying attention.

His toe catches on the porch steps and they almost go down, half-falling against the cheap press-board door. It jerks open from the inside, and there's a skinny girl standing in the kitchen with a butcher knife clutched in a white-knuckled grip.

Dean decides right then and there that he likes her.

***

Nellie gets Jay settled in a chair with an ice-pack, offers Dean a beer in a tone of voice that's still skirting the edge of scared. He can't really blame her--having a bloody, unshaven stranger with a gun hanging out in the kitchen is probably kind of unnerving even under the best circumstances, which these aren't--but it still stings a little.

He takes the beer and leans against the door, as far away from her as he can get without actually being outside, looks around. It's an old trailer, bright and cheap and clean, colorful alphabet magnets on the fridge, the old TV in the living room muted on a rerun of 'Saved by the Bell'. There's a grizzled, potbellied man who must be Nellie's father passed out on the couch with an ashtray on his chest, completely dead to the world.

Nellie and Jay are talking quietly at the kitchen table, and Dean tunes in just in time to hear Jay ask "...Missy okay?"

"Yeah," Nellie says, and cuts another nervous glance at Dean. "She's in her room."

"Good," Jay says. "That's good, sweetheart. You wanna tell me what happened?"

Nellie tucks her hair behind her ears and looks down at the tabletop. Her expression is too old for her face. It's one Dean's seen in a mirror a time or two. "You're gonna think I'm nuts."

"Doubt it."

"I think I'm nuts."

"Big Eddie, right?" Dean says. She jumps and looks up at him, eyes wide and dark. There are bruises on her neck. She can't be more than sixteen. He clears his throat. "It was Big Eddie, right?"

"He's dead," says Nellie flatly. Her eyes are red and hurt in her pale face.

"Yeah. But you still saw him."

She looks away. "I don't know what I saw."

Jay take out his cigarettes and starts shaking one out. He really doesn't look nearly as freaked out by this as he probably should, but that might just be the concussion. "Honey, what the hell do you think we were shooting at out there?"

"I don't *know,* okay?" She bites her lip hard, looks up at Dean, looks away. Normally, he'd be the one smiling and charming and reassuring--that's his job, because Sam's usually too busy sulking and Dad just scares the hell out of people--but she's still looking at him like he might suddenly leap across the room and attack her. Better to just let Jay handle it.

He has to call Dad anyway, let him know he's still breathing. "Gotta step out," he mutters, and isn't at all surprised that neither one of them barely glances up at him when he slips out into the cool night. He dials the number by feel with fingers that aren't shaking, not at all.

Dad picks up halfway through the first ring. "Report."

"Well, I'm not dead," Dean says, propping his hip against the porch railing.

"What about the spirit?"

"He's history. Good timing on that one, by the way. You guys make it out okay?"

In the background, Sam says something too quiet to hear, but his grumpy tone comes through loud and clear. Great.

"We're fine," Dad says shortly. "Heading back to the motel now."

"Good," Dean says. And then, for no good reason he can think of, adds, "I'm gonna stick around here for a little while, make sure everybody's okay."

He's half-expecting Dad to order him to get his ass back to the motel pronto--God knows leaving him and Sam alone for any stretch of time is freaking terrible idea right now--but he doesn't. "Fine. I expect you back here by morning, though. We're heading out. I want to get a couple of days in at the Boston College libraries before classes start up again."

So that's why Sam's being all pissy. Got it. Tomorrow's gonna be *loads* of fun. "Yessir," he says, and hangs up.

He hesitates for a long minute with his hand on the doorknob, watching Jay and Nellie talk through the window. It's not exactly a portrait of Rockwellian happiness, but there's something about their easy familiarity that makes him feel a little wistful. Maybe just the way Dad and Sam have been sniping at each other for the past three days, with no end in sight. Even under these circumstances, it's nice to be around people who aren't constantly trying to start a fistfight.

He stands there on the dark porch for a few more minutes, watching them, then shakes his head and goes back inside.

***

"A ghost," Nellie says, and lets out a sharp, pained bark of laughter. "A *ghost."*

Jay lights his cigarette. Mae would slap him silly for smoking in her house, but he's feeling the need for a little nicotine comfort right about now. "You saw him too, sweetheart."

"I must be losing my damn mind."

"Yeah," Jay says, rubs the back of his head. The concussion ain't bad, but it's making his mind slow and groggy. Makes the whole thing seem unreal. Hell, maybe he is losing it. Maybe they all are. At least Nellie has an excuse. "Believe me, I know."

"I called the police on a *ghost,"* Nellie says, sounding more than a little hysterical. "Can I have a cigarette, please?"

"You know what your mama would do to me?" he asks, but he's already shaking out another smoke and handing it over.

She lights it, face tight. "Yeah, well, Mama's not here right now. That *fucker."*

"He's gone now."

"What, getting the back of his head blown off didn't do the trick?"

The front door swings open on creaky hinges, and Jay don't miss the way Nellie jerks and turns white, looking at it. It's just Dean, though. He shuts the door behind him and leans back against it, heavy-limbed. The gun's holstered at his side, familiar, easy. "Restless spirits *suck,"* he says. "Jay's right. He's gone."

"Yeah," Jay says. "You planning on telling me how that works? I thought we were all dead meat."

That gets him a little smile, the kind that wants to be amused but can't quite pull it off. "Dad and Sammy broke into the funeral home and torched the body. Salt and burn. It's the only sure-fire way to get rid of a ghost problem."

For a couple of long moments, the kitchen's silent. Then Jay lets out a low whistle, hollow to his own ears. "You ain't kidding. Ghost problem, huh."

"Hey, we all saw it. You want to pretend it was just some kind of mass hallucination, be my guest. I really don't give a rat's ass." He says it more like he wants it to be true than like it really is, and when he catches Nellie's eyes, his laughing eyes are tired and sad. "Anyway, he's gone for good now. I promise."

She takes a long drag on her cigarette, mouth turned down at the corners and too old for her face, and nods. "Thanks."

"All part of the service package," Dean says, and if it's supposed to be a joke it falls damn flat. Jay shifts his grip on the ice pack he's holding with one hand, taps the column of ash off the tip of his cigarette with the other. Tonight, he just saw an honest-to-god impossibility in the flesh, so to speak. Seems like he ought to be able to muster up some feeling over it, but all he can manage is dull, tired relief.

"So this is what y'all do. Hunt ghosts."

"Monsters, too."

"What?"

"Not just ghosts. Monsters, wraiths, demons, creepy-crawlies of every description..." He glances at Nellie again and stops. "It's a job. Sort of."

"Sure," Jay says. "Monsters. Why the hell not." He takes a final drag on

his cigarette and stands up, braced for the way the world starts to tilt sluggishly beneath his feet. Been a while since he cracked his head this good. It's just as much fun as he remembers.

Goddamn Eddie, anyway. Shoulda figured that bastard wouldn't have the sense to stay dead. He lets out a snort, grips the table hard to steady himself, and then Dean's there, warm and solid and way too close for comfort. "You okay?"

"I'm great."

"Yeah," Dean says. "I see that. Sit down."

"I gotta--" Jay makes a vague motion with the butt of his smoke, and Dean plucks it out of his fingers, pinches out the cherry and drops in in the garbage can by the door.

"Just sit, okay? Jesus."

He sounds so much like a fussy nursemaid that Jay has to grin. "Sure thing, boss."

***

They hang around until Nellie goes to bed. Jay's steady enough on his feet by then to walk her to the room she shares with Missy, kiss her on the forehead and tell her to call if she needs anything. Missy's sound asleep in bed, hair spread across her pink Barbie pillow, and Nellie crawls onto the mattress behind her without even kicking her shoes off.

"Sleep tight," Jay says, hand on the doorknob.

"Yeah." Her voice is muffled against her sister's hair, equal parts sleepy and bitter. "If I'm lucky, maybe this was all just a bad dream."

He don't know what to say to that, so he just pulls the door shut behind him and stands in the hall for a couple of minutes, hand braced against the wood-paneled wall.

When he makes it out to the kitchen, the dark outside is turning gray and Dean's waiting by the door, flipping his keys around and around in the palm of his hand. "You gonna be okay to drive?"

His head feels like--well, kinda like somebody slammed it into a tree as hard as it would go. His gut still ain't happy with him either, but it's not that far to his place even if he takes it slow. "Yeah, I'll be fine."

It ain't quite morning when they step outside, but it's light enough that Jay can see Dean's big black car parked behind a patch of bushes, where it'd be out of sight in the dark. Jay pauses there on the way to his truck, watches Dean settle one hand on the wet sheet metal. He touches that car like a lover, careless and possessive, and the spark of heat that sends down Jay's spine ain't so much unexpected as it is unwanted.

"So," he says.

Dean squints at him, wary. "Yeah?"

"You're heading out." It ain't a question.

"Yeah, Dad's got this...thing. In Massachusetts." He rolls his eyes, and there's a hint of a smile there for the first time since that ghost disappeared. "Should be a fun ride."

"So, he's really gone. For good. Eddie," Jay adds, in case that wasn't clear.

"Yeah."

"Some job you got."

Dean sighs. "Yeah, tell me about it. Hey, you got a pen?"

He always keeps a couple in his front pocket, stolen from motels, mostly, and covered in axle-grease fingerprints. Dean takes it and scribbles something down on what looks like a crumpled receipt. He hands it and the pen back to Jay, and their fingers brush in a way that feels like it maybe could be on purpose.

Jay looks down at the paper in his hand. It's a phone number.

"In case you ever have any more spook infestations," Dean says. If Jay was fifteen years younger or a different person, he'd maybe try to read something else into it, but he ain't, so he just shoves the paper in his pocket.

"Appreciate it. What'd you shoot him with?"

"What?"

"Eddie. Bullets didn't do much good."

"Oh," Dean says, and grins. "Uh, iron rounds. Good against most nasties."

"Good to know." Jay holds out a hand, and Dean takes it.

"Keep in touch," he says, and Jay nods.

"Sure will."

He heads back to his truck as the Impala roars to life behind him, and Dean flicks him a little wave as he rolls out onto the driveway. Jay waves back, unlocks his truck, climbs inside. Then just sits there for a couple of minutes, letting his thoughts settle.

"Ghosts," he says out loud, just testing the word out, and if the laugh that comes out of his mouth sounds a little hysterical, well, he thinks he can be forgiven for that.

***

Mae's trial is in August. It's a big damn circus, reporters circling like vultures, and Nellie spends most of the summer hiding out at the trailer or the garage. She's got another year of school left, and he's not sure if she's gonna go. Be a damn shame, her so smart, but there it is.

"Just get so sick of them *staring* all the time," she tells him when she drops in on the way to pick Missy up from her piano lesson. Jake is out of town on a construction job, the first real work he's had in months. Normally, Nellie waits tables at Fran's Diner over the summer vacation, but not this summer. They're tight on cash without the extra income, and Jay takes to dropping off groceries once a week or so. They visit with Mae at the county jail, and she always talks about things like the annual craft fair and the weather. Never her trial. Never Eddie.

The shape of the world still seems so off, tilted sideways like he's on a

ship and he don't know how to find his sea-legs.

"You know," Marty says one night over a case of beers and a game of darts after the bar closes, "ain't any real reason you gotta stick around here."

Jay snorts and crosses the room to jerk his darts out of the pocked corkboard. Not one of them's on target. "You went and gave me the set that was bent, didn't you?" he says instead of answering.

"Nah," Marty says, taking his first shot with a perfect, almost casual, flick of the wrist. Bullseye. "You never were much good at this game."

"Yeah," Jay says absently, reaching for another beer out of the case under the table. Maybe it's a little bit of a strange habit, him bringing a case of beer around to a goddamn *bar,* but half the time Marty don't charge him anyways, and it ain't entirely fair to keep on drinking up the man's stock.

It ain't exactly a normal kind of friendship, but this place has been a refuge for Jay since back in his restless high-school days, back when Marty was just one of the bartenders, and it still feels kind of safe. Friendly, maybe.

And Marty's one of the only people who never gave him shit about where he was and what he was doing in the eleven years he was gone. That counts for a lot.

"All in the wrist," Marty says, sending another dart flying toward the board. "I swear, my grand-daughter is better at this than you, and she's four."

"Her mama lets her play with darts?" Jay asks, twisting the cap off his beer and taking a swig. "How's New York treating Shayna, anyhow?"

"Doin' good," Marty says easily, crossing over to gather up his darts and mark down his score with the nub of chalk.

"Good. That's good."

"Yeah. You could take a page outta her book, you know."

"How's that?"

Marty rolls his eyes. "Don't you play dumb with me, boy. Shayna lit on out of here soon as she got the chance, same as you did. You could do it again. Ain't like you got much keeping you here."

"Somebody's gotta keep an eye on Nellie and Missy," Jay says, taking his first shot. He puts a little more force into it than he has to, and the dart misses the board to land quivering in the wall. "Anyway, where the hell else am I gonna go?"

Marty sighs, but lets it go.

***

Jake gets back in time for the trial, dresses up in a suit and tie and sits in the courtroom with his daughters, looking awkward and out-of-place. Jay can sympathize with that, but he can't sympathize with the way the man still can't seem to look Nellie in the eye and the way he ain't been to see Mae one single time since she turned herself in.

He's polite, though, when he sits down on Nellie's other side, and doesn't complain when she squeezes his hand so hard he's pretty sure there's no blood left in it when the judge reads the verdict. *We find the defendant guilty of manslaughter in the first degree.*

Ain't exactly a shock, but that don't make it easier to hear.

Nellie curses a blue streak all the way to the car. Jay nods and agrees and lets her steal a couple of smokes off of him before he goes in to see Mae.

"Hey, sweetheart," she says, smiling.

"Believe your daughter's about ready to bust you out already," he tells her. "She cussed out the sheriff."

Mae smiles wider. "That's my girl. You'll look after her, won't you, Jay?"

Should be the kid's father looking after her, but it's been the other way around for too long already. Jay's a lousy second choice and he knows it, but he's also all there is. "Yeah," he says. "Course I will."

***

Dean's number is stuck to a piece of corkboard over the kitchen table. Ten digits in an unfamiliar blocky script. Jay ain't labeled it, but he don't need to.

It only takes five beers before it seems like a good idea to call.

***

"What, are you serious?" Dean sounds outraged, and that makes Jay feel a little better. He blows smoke out into the low dusk of his kitchen. Outside, the sky is heavy and gray and he can see streaks of lightening over the line of trees across his backyard.

"Yeah. Manslaughter one."

"After what he did--"

"Yeah," Jay says again.

"Well, *that's* fair."

"Could have been worse," Jay says. He's been trying to convince himself of that very thing through the whole drive home and all five beers. "She'll be out in six years with good behavior."

"Still."

"Yeah."

Dean's quiet for a couple of minutes. "Sammy wants to be a lawyer," he says after a while.

"Lawyer, huh." There's one more beer in the six-pack in front of him. He pulls it out and twists the cap off, holds the cool glass against his cheek for a minute.

"Yeah," Dean says sourly. "He's been collecting college applications, stuff on pre-law programs. Cornell, Stanford, fucking*Harvard.* He thinks I don't know."

Most families'd be proud, but the Winchesters ain't most families.

Sam's a smart kid, Jay remembers. Stubborn as hell. This is gonna end ugly, he thinks, and Dean probably knows that as well as he does.

"Boy's gotta find his own path," he says, then stops. Ain't really his place to say anything, even if Dean brought it up, but Dean just sighs.

"Dad's not gonna see it like that," he says. "I don't know. I mean, our life isn't that bad, you know?"

"Uh-huh." He remembers Dean at nineteen, skinny as a twig in thirdhand clothes, all bluster and desperation. He turned out okay, but that ain't a life Jay'd wish on anybody.

"I don't know, man, I just--" He cuts off sharply.

Over the line Jay can hear a door slam shut, a clatter. *"Shit,"* Dean mutters, muffled like he has a hand over the phone. "Dad, are you-- Sammy, what happened?" Then, shortly, "I gotta go."

"Sure," Jay says, but he's already talking to dead air.

***

Dean calls him back a couple of days later, as he's closing up the garage. "Hey."

"Hey, Jay." He sounds tired. "Sorry about the other day. Banshee."

Banshee. Sure. Why the hell not. "Don't worry about it."

"Thanks," Dean says, and sighs. "We're in Arizona. It's about three hundred degrees outside, and the A/C's broken. Good times."

"Sounds like it."

"Yeah, and Sam keeps trying to pick a fight. I'm hiding out in the car, but I think my skin's about to fuse with the seats." He stops for a long minute. "Sorry, man. You probably don't need to hear about all my shit."

"That's alright," Jay says, and means it. "Reckon everybody needs to unload every once in a while."

"Usually I just go pick a bar and find an excuse to punch somebody's lights out." Dean coughs. "Which I guess you kinda knew."

Jay stops by the truck, leans back against the sun-hot metal, and laughs. Really laughs, for the first time in a while. "You and me both."

Dean's laughing too, wry. "Sam says I have anger management issues." There's a creak, a burst of noise that might be shouting in the distance. "Anyway, I gotta get going. Just wanted to let you know we're all still breathing."

"Appreciate it," Jay says, turning to unlock his truck door. It's getting on towards nightfall and the air is cool, but the truck's like a sauna inside. "Y'all look after yourself, hear?"

"Yeah, you too." Dean's voice is softer, like maybe he's smiling on the other end of the line, and that pulls a smile onto Jay's face. "Good talking to you, man."

"You too," Jay murmurs. He hangs up, drops the phone in his pocket, and leans his forehead against the doorframe with a sigh. He's so fucked.

***

In September, Nellie starts her senior year of school with the rest of her class. She's gonna go to college, she tells Jay. Be a nurse. Get the hell out of this shithole town.

It's a little like talking to himself, back in '84, after the blowout that got him kicked out of the house three days after he finished high school. Join the military. Be a Marine. Get the hell out of this shithole town. Seven years in the service and then four down in Texas with Keith, and here he is, thirty-five years old and right back where he started.

He don't say that to Nellie, though. Maybe she'll have better luck than he did. God knows the kid deserves it.

Chapter 4

March, 2002

Dean's drinking a beer on the back stoop of the run-down cabin they're renting, watching the rain and avoiding the cold war going on in the kitchen, when his cell rings. He flips it open without looking at the number. "This is Dean."

"Hey. It's Jay." It's been months, but he still sounds the same, the low tenor gone rough and deeper than it should be from too much smoking, the Carolina drawl. *"How you been, kid?"*

A door slams inside, hard enough to rattle the windows. Dad and Sam stopped shouting at each other a while ago, but there's always a chance one or the other of them will come out here to bitch to him. Dean thinks he should start charging by the hour. "Been better," he says. "What's up?"

"Had a question for you."

"Alright, shoot."

"You ever hear of something called a Jersey Devil?"

Shit. "Like an evil-looking flying horse that likes to snack on livestock?"

"That'd be it. Marty down at the bar reckons he saw one. Most folks figure he's been dipping into his own stock, but that ain't like him."

"Well, they're real, if that's what you're asking."

"Yeah, I wondered. Think we might have one wandering the neighborhood."

Just in case his day wasn't sucking enough. "Shit. Okay, hang on a second. We're in North Dakota, there's gotta be somebody closer--" Pastor Jim's a little closer, but not by much and he doesn't like to leave his parish. Johnson and Yukimi are up in Canada, Caleb's in the middle of a hunt, and old Angie Ramirez lit out to Hawaii last year. Fuck.

"You know how to handle them?" Jay asks after Dean's quiet for a

minute.

"Iron rounds to the head should do the trick," he says absently, "but we're two days away from you and--"

"Iron rounds I can get my hands on," Jay says, astonishingly. *"Anything else I should know?"*

"Wait. Dude, you're not--"

"Said it yourself, ain't nobody else around. Anything else I should know?"

"For the record, I think this is a bad idea."

"Heard you the first time," Jay says. There's some amusement in his voice, an edge of something else Dean can't identify. He can't think of any reason that it should make heat pool in the pit of his stomach but it does, desire hitting like a gut-punch.

He doesn't even fucking *like* guys like that, and he's bent over for enough sleazy assholes for rent money or bail to know.

Jay, though, Jay's different. And the last thing Dean needs in his life right now is a sexual identity crisis, so he shakes his head and clears his throat and tries to recall everything Dad scribbled down about that Jersey Devil in Maryland last winter. The notebook's on Dad's dresser, but he really doesn't want to head back in there just yet if he doesn't have to. Jersey Devils are pretty straightforward, anyway, as far as monsters go.

Jay waits patiently while he thinks; it's never been his way to fill up stretches of silence with chatter. Dean appreciates that, most of the time, but right now it's incredibly fucking distracting trying to think with Jay breathing slow and even on the other end of the line, just breathing. Waiting for him to speak.

"Okay," he says finally, and he isn't even surprised to find that his voice has gone raspy. "So, they nest in oak trees, usually as deep in the woods as they can get. Not more than two or three in a nest. They'd rather munch on cattle than people, but they'll attack if you get too close."

"Right."

"If you leave a bowl of milk near the edge of a field, that'll draw them out, but you want to find the nest, make sure there aren't any young." He pauses. "They aren't all that dangerous to humans. If you want to wait a week or so--"

"Emmet Harle's already lost half his stock," Jay interrupts. *"I'll take care of it. Appreciate the help."*

"No problem," Dean murmurs. "Hey, Jay?"

"Yeah?"

"Be careful."

Jay chuckles, low and warm. *"Will do."*

The line goes dead, and he's sitting on the damp porch with a warm beer, phone pressed to his ear, half-hard and confused as fuck.

Inside, there's the sound of another door slamming. Dad growls something, and there's the sharp bark of Sam's retort, and it's on again. Dean sighs and empties his beer over the edge of the porch into the wet grass. Fuck it. His baby's long overdue for a tune-up, and he's long overdue to spend a little quality time with his best girl. She can be a finicky bitch, but at least she's up-front about it.

It's not until he's under the Impala, jeans soaked to the knee, elbow scraped and motor oil on his face, that his mind stops spinning.

***

Marty ain't all that eager to talk about it, and Jay can't say he's surprised. Man's a worse gossip than any five old biddies, but he ain't in any great hurry to get called crazy again. In the end, it takes Jay an hour and a half and five beers after Marty closes up to get him started.

"Figured I'd lost my damn mind," Marty says, spinning a half-empty glass distractedly in his gnarled brown hands. No darts this time, and it's quiet in here without the jukebox going. "Lost my mind. Ain't right that critters like that can walk around in the light of day. Just ain't right."

"Sure," Jay says, bumping his shoulder companionably. It's kind of

funny to remember Dean and his daddy the last time they were in here, figure this was exactly what they were pulling on him. Marty's a friend, and if Jay were a better man he'd sit down and lay the whole business out for him, but he ain't and he don't. Some things are better not to know. "Where'd you see it?"

"Out by the edge of Earl Dempster's place, you know up on Ridgewater? Near that stack of junker cars he's got out by the woods."

Earl Dempster is an asshole, and if it was just his cattle, Jay would give some serious consideration to letting the monster do its business in peace. Ain't fair to the rest of the town, though, so he just claps Marty on the shoulder and gets to his feet.

"Thanks, Marty."

Marty's eyes, squinting out of his creased face, are a little too sharp to belong to a man as drunk as he is. "You think I'm nuts."

"Nah." Jay thinks about Dean shooting a ghost full of iron shot in Mae's front lawn last spring and he can't quite bring himself to lie. Ain't lie Marty's gonna remember it anyhow. "I believe you. Get yourself to bed now, you hear? Sleep it off."

Marty grumbles, but he don't argue. Jay sticks around long enough to make sure he don't break his neck on the narrow stairs going up to his apartment over the bar, then leaves.

***

It's after three in the morning when he gets outside, but he's feeling restless and twitchy. Got everything he needs to go after the critter waiting in the truck, and hell, there's no time like the present.

He swings by his place to pick up a mixing bowl and a gallon of milk and then drives out to Ridgewater Hill where Earl keeps his fifty acres of scrubgrass and cattle fenced in with barbed-wire that's twenty years old if it's a day. The half-assed junkyard that all the local kids raid for parts is tucked into the edge of the treeline away from the house, and Jay has to wade through sloppy, tangled dead grass that ain't been mowed in a year or more. Serve the dumb bastard right if he gets a grassfire up here come summer.

He feels more than a little stupid setting out the bowl of milk on a flat stretch of rock and standing there with his shotgun aimed at the dark woods, but he's hardly had enough time to start wondering if he ought to come back when there's enough light to see when he hears wings.

It ain't quiet, that's for sure. Goddamn thing sounds like a chopper coming down out of the murky sky and it screams when it sees him, showing teeth too sharp and white for a horse's mouth. Just in case the fifteen-foot wingspan and red eyes weren't enough of a giveaway.

Jay pulls back, braces himself against the backdraft of those giant wings, and fires.

The first shot goes wild, and the thing screams again, more like nails on a chalkboard than the kind of sound anything living ought to make. It rears, wings spread, kicking at the night air, and Jay's second shot catches it between the eyes. It crumples.

Jay lowers the gun, cautious, but it ain't moving. The stink is fucking incredible and for a minute he wonders what the hell he's gonna do with the body; then he realizes he don't have to worry. It's like watching a thing rot in double-time, skin going fragile and sliding away from the bone, crumpling and curling and turning greasy black, and inside of five minutes there ain't nothing left but a pile of muck and a nasty smell.

He kicks it apart until it ain't identifiable anymore, empties out the bowl of milk, packs up his gun and drives home.

Inside the door, he kicks off his boots. They reek like monster gunk. He's tired as hell, that's the first time since Kuwait that he's shot anything other than cans and skeet, and tomorrow he's gonna have to track down the nest and finish off the young.

He still sleeps better than night than he has since last spring.

***

August, 2002

Sam's half a mile down the highway, stalking along under the streetlamps with his head down and his giant pack dragging at his shoulders when Dean catches up to him. He pulls over, rolls down the

window, and leans out. "Hey."

"Don't bother," Sam spits. He keeps walking, doesn't even stop to look up. With a sigh, Dean puts the Impala back in drive and crawls along next to him. It's a little cooler now that the sun's down, but the air is still sticky-warm through the open window. "I'm not going back."

"Wasn't gonna ask you to." He was, actually, but there's no way even in his head that it won't sound like begging and *fuck*if he's going to do that. "Dude, come on. Would you just hang on for a second?"

Sam stops, plants his feet in the gravel shoulder, and turns toward him with his arms folded tightly across his chest. It's the kind of pose that's clearly supposed to look tough but actually looks more like he's trying to hug himself. His face is red and his eyes are leaking. He looks closer to twelve than eighteen. *"What?"*

Dean sighs again. "Sam, I have a headache and it is way too fucking hot for this. Come on. Get in the car."

"Was there some part of 'I'm not going back' that you didn't get?"

"Yeah, I heard you loud and clear the first time." Dean grins around the hard knot of panic settling like a stone in his guts. "Get in. I'll give you a ride to the station."

For a long minute, Sam just stares at him, and Dean wonders what he's going to do if Sam tells him to go to hell like he did Dad. "Fine," he says at last, and tosses his bag in the back seat.

There's no conversation on the way to the bus station. Sam's all but grinding his teeth and Dean's got a mouthful of words he's not gonna say, from *Dad's just worried, he didn't mean it* to *What the hell kind of selfish bastard are you* to *Sammy, please don't go.*

"We're here," he points out unnecessarily when he pulls into a spot near the main entrance. The parking lot is flooded with too-bright light, and the air tastes like asphalt and exhaust fumes. "Last chance to back out."

"I got a *full ride*, Dean," Sam says, opening his door. "To *Stanford*. I'm not backing out."

"Yeah, I figured," Dean mutters. He cuts the engine and climbs out,

braces himself against the hot metal roof of his car. "Look, Sammy--"

"Come with me," Sam interrupts. He looks even younger, suddenly, scared and desperate.

Dean stares. "What?"

"You could come with me."

Yeah, be the highschool-dropout with the rap sheet a mile long, hanging around all Sam's new college buddies. Like the pothead loser big brother from fifteen-billion teen drama flicks. That'd be a laugh and a half. "Nah. Somebody's gotta stick around and take care of Dad."

He didn't mean it like that, but the mention of Dad does the trick. He can almost see Sam pulling himself back in, tossing up a pissy facade over his hurt. "Yeah, well, I guess that's what you do best, isn't it?"

"Sam, I really don't want to fight with you right now."

"So don't," Sam snaps, but he doesn't push it. "Dean, this is my life, okay? *My* life, not Dad's."

"I get it, okay? Jesus." For lack of anything better to do, he pulls out his wallet. There's not much in there, but he digs out a twenty and two fives; it's a long ride to California, and he's betting Sam blew all his cash on the bus ticket. He slides the money across the top of the car. "Here. Don't starve to death on the way there."

Sam's mouth twists, but he pockets it. "Thanks."

"Keep your knife handy. I don't care if your roommate thinks it's weird."

"Dean--"

"And bang a lot of sorority chicks, okay?"

"Dean."

He tries out a smile. "Just take care of yourself, Sammy."

"I'll be fine," Sam says, and glances down at his watch. "My bus is gonna be leaving soon. I should go."

"Yeah," Dean says. His throat feels dry.

Sam flashes him a smile, quick and nervous and so fucking eager that Dean wants to punch something. "I'll call you, okay?" he says, and Dean knows it's a lie even if Sam doesn't, yet.

He watches his brother walk away, and then he gets in his car and drives home to Dad.

***

Dad leaves about two weeks later. Two weeks of slamming around their tiny apartment and pretending nothing's wrong, and then all of a sudden there's some incredibly fucking urgent research that needs doing up in Quebec, which is conveniently about as far away from Stanford as he can get without hopping on a boat.

He splits in the night, the way he used to when they were kids and Sam would cry when Dad left them. Dean wakes up to an empty apartment and coordinates scribbled on the back of a bar napkin on the kitchen table. Coordinates and a note.*Dean, take care of this. I have some things to work on in Montreal, call if there are any complications.*

The coordinates are for West Virginia.

His cell phone's in his palm and his thumb hovers between the speed-dials for Dad and Sam for a long minute before he slaps it shut. Fuck it. He's a big boy. He can handle a hunt on his own.

He cleans out the fridge on his way out, leaves the door unlocked and the keys on the kitchen table. By nightfall, he's got three hundred miles behind him and he is absolutely fucking peachy.

***

Turns out there's a coven wreaking havoc (mostly by accident; five bored college students and a mostly-bogus grimoire wouldn't even be worth getting out of bed for if they hadn't managed to summon not one but three Salamanders without a single binding spell) in Lewisburg. Dean ices the Salamanders, torches the grimoire, and delivers a stern lecture to the dumb kids who started the whole mess.

See, Sammy, he thinks when the oldest boy's chin trembles under the brunt of his tirade. *And you thought college was the safe bet.*

One of them is a smokin' hot brunette, and he doesn't even try to get in her pants. And yeah, it's probably because he's fucking stupid, but he doesn't really notice he has a problem until the hunt's over and he's sitting in the back of some anonymous pool-hall, scanning the crowd, and he realizes that he isn't looking for an easy mark or a quick fuck. He's looking for the pocket of space Dad always causes at a bar no matter how full the place is. He's looking for Sam's too-big form hunched over in one of these back booths with a soda and a book. He's looking for his fucking family.

He's such a moron. Only halfway through his third beer and he feels like he's gonna puke, the smoky air heavy and too close, and he shoves himself to his feet, stumbles out of the bar and leans against the outside wall, taking huge, gasping breaths of the night.

Pastor Jim's place is only about a day from here. He could drive over, get a good meal and a few nights of sleep in a familiar place. Hell, if he looks half as miserable as he feels, Jim might even skip the preaching. It's a good idea. He's running on fumes and temper right now, and it would be smart to go someplace quiet and get his head on straight.

He already knows he isn't going to.

***

Metallica's tearing up his eardrums as he drives south on Interstate 77, fifteen miles an hour over the speed limit and telling himself he's not headed anywhere in particular.

It's a little more than an hour later when he crosses over the Carolina border.

***

It's days like this he'd stay away from the bar, if he had any sense. 'Specially with Marty up in New York visiting his family and what looks like a rowdy Saturday-night crowd. Full parking lot, anyway,

and lightning in the air when Jay pulls into his usual spot near the back.

He gave Nellie and Missy a ride up to the state pen today to visit with Mae. It's good to see her and she's doing about as well as can he expected, but those visits always put some kind of restlessness in him.

If he had any sense, he'd go back to his place, catch a game on his old TV and head to bed early. Used to be, Keith would drag him home when these kind of moods hit. He always used to say Jay had more temper than a quiet fellow had any right to, but Keith's seven years gone now, and Jay needs a drink. He shoulders the door open a little harder than he probably needs to, kicks it shut behind him.

There's a wild kind of tension inside, like a thunderstorm found its way into the bar. The jukebox is on loud, but he can't hardly hear the music over the sound of hooting and cheering, the sick wet *thud* of flesh on flesh. Bar-fight. Over in the back corner, on the other side of the dance floor. So much for a quiet goddamn drink.

Somehow, he ain't even surprised when the crowd shifts and there's Dean Winchester, standing foot-planted on the sticky floor and wiping blood off his face with the back of his hand. That's just the way his day's been going.

Somebody's on the floor. Earl Dempster, looks like, and he's down for the count even if he ain't quite out yet. Legs kicking, but he ain't trying to get up. Dean's got two more guys facing him and a grin like a powderkeg.

He's fucking magnetic.

"Come on, now," he's saying. "Not my fault you can't tell the pocket from your own asshole. Just hand over the money you owe me and we can forget any of this ever happened."

Been a few years since Jay first hauled the kid out of a barfight, and if he had a lick of common sense he'd leave well enough alone, let Dean take out whatever's riding him on Jimmy and Earl. World owes those two assholes a couple of beatings at least, and Dean can take care of himself.

That'd be the smart move, but he ain't ever been able to make the smart move where Dean's concerned. He's across the bar before he

even thinks about it, throwing an arm around the kid's strong shoulders. Gets an elbow to the ribs for his trouble, not hard enough to do any damage. A warning shot, a *leave me the hell alone.*

Jay ignores it, shifts his grip and aims a big, unfriendly grin at Jimmy. "'Scuse my friend, here, fellas. He's having a bad day."

That much is true, for damn sure. Given the fact that it's late August and Dean's baby brother was making college noises last he heard, Jay can even hazard a pretty good guess as to why.

"Fuck off," Dean snaps, no questions about where Jay came from or what the hell he thinks he's doing. He's vibrating with tension, but he ain't stumbling enough to be drunk. Sober and pissed off, which just makes him that much more dangerous. "I can fucking take care of myself."

"Yeah," Jay says easily. "I see that. Come on."

It's about fifteen feet to the door, and every single step of them he's expecting to get jumped from behind, or for Dean to shrug him off and go back to his tussle. It don't happen. They get through the crowd without anything but a couple of sidelong stares. Jimmy and Earl don't seem disposed to take on the both of them together. Smart choice.

"...fucking let go of me, I'm not a fucking kid," Dean growls as Jay opens the door with one hand, keeping a good grip on his shoulder with the other. He don't make any attempt at getting loose, though, so Jay just pushes him out into the quiet night.

The door slams shut behind them, and Dean wrenches away from Jay's grip, breathing hard through his nose, then surges forward and shoves him up against the brick wall. His face is carved in shadow, hurt eyes blazing, and Jay's so braced for a punch that the kiss catches him completely off his guard. It ain't gentle, not even close. Dean kisses hard and desperate, and Jay would move his head back if the wall wasn't in the way. His hands come up, grip Dean's shoulders to push him back, but somewhere halfway through he loses the momentum for it and just holds on, fingers flexing in Dean's thin t-shirt.

It don't last long, maybe five seconds, and then Dean's pulling back. He still looks tense and furious, and Jay licks his lips. "Dean--"

"Shut up. Just--shut up, okay?" His voice is harsh.

Jay puts his head back against the wall, sighs. The night's cooling down, and there's heat rolling off of Dean in waves. He's a big, solid shape, hands braced against the wall on either side of Jay's head, bodies not quite touching anywhere but so damn close. "This ain't gonna fix anything."

"I know," Dean says. "I *know,* okay? I'm not looking--I don't--fuck."

There's a long goddamn list of reasons this is a bad idea, starting with the thirteen years between them and ending with the aimless fury riding behind Dean's eyes. And suddenly, not a single one of them matters. The space between them is too easy to cross, and he pulls Dean back in, mouths slotting together like they were made for it, rough and slick, stubble under his fingers.

"Son of a bitch," Dean murmurs, voice gone soft and startled. His right hand drops to Jay's shoulder, heavy and warm against the collar of his t-shirt, rough thumb brushing the bare skin of his neck.

This is a bad fucking idea, and he can't come up with a single reason they ought to stop.

***

They make it all the way to where Dean's beast of a car is parked in the back lot under a broken streetlight. The black sheet metal gleams like oil, and it's cool against his ass when Dean backs him up against it. The lot's quiet, empty for now, but anybody could come outside.

"Should get out of here," Jay murmurs, but Dean's fingers are already undoing his belt, quick and sure, no hesitation at all.

"Nah," he mutters, rough against Jay's ear. "Here's good."

"You wanna get us lynched, kid?" Jay asks, and Dean pulls away enough to grin. It's sharp-edged and a little too tight.

"Good point." He slides his hand behind Jay to open the back door, and then they're tumbling inside, onto the broad backseat. Dean pulls the door shut behind him without looking, like he's done this a thousand times before. Hell, he probably has.

Jay thinks about pointing out that the backseat of a car in a crowded parking lot ain't exactly private either, and that the smart thing would be to head back to his place or the motel, or to just can the whole idea. Then Dean's working on his belt again, breath coming out in a frustrated little huff against his collarbone, the hem of his t-shirt riding up under Jay's fingers. Hell with it. He's never been one for doing the smart thing anyway.

Dean gets his belt undone and slides down, letting his t-shirt come up under Jay's fingers. He pulls away long enough to yank it over his head and toss it at the front seat, and then he's shoving Jay up until his shoulders hit the opposite door, glass slick and cool on the back of his head, legs falling apart when Dean runs his hands up the inseams of his jeans. It's cramped in here, hot air going damp with how hard they're both breathing, and he feels a little like he dropped his brain somewhere out in the parking lot.

"Hey," he says. "Slow the hell down, would you?"

Dean snorts. "You want roses or something?"

"You're an obnoxious little shit, you know that?" Jay says, only it's hard to put much feeling into it when Dean's shoved his t-shirt just far enough out of the way that he can suck a line down the flat of his stomach.

"Yeah," Dean says from somewhere in the vicinity of Jay's belly button, thumbs riding low on his hips. He don't sound all that sorry. "So?"

"Just saying."

"Duly noted. You want me to suck your dick or not?"

His voice sounds good like that, fucking obscene, warm breath against sweaty skin, and Jay can't make himself speak. His hips lift all on their own, though, and that seems to be enough of an answer. Dean unfastens his fly deftly, shoves his jeans and boxers out of the way, and palms his cock with one broad hand.

Jay arches into it, fingers flexing against the smooth leather seat. "Fuck."

"That's the idea," Dean says, low and amused, and sucks him down.

"Fuck," Jay hisses again, eyes slamming shut, sucking air in across his teeth. It's been a long time, a damn long time and sweet fucking Christ does Dean know what he's doing, all hot lewd tongue, one hand holding Jay's hip down, the other one curved knowingly around the base of his cock, matching the rhythm of his mouth. Nowhere near gentle, but gentle ain't what either one of them is looking for.

His hand finds its way to the sharp curve of Dean's cheek, the shell of his ear, the soft, smooth skin at the back of his neck. Almost fragile. Ain't nothing fragile about the strong hand pressing him into the seat, though. Or his mouth, slick wet heat and suction, the slight scrape of teeth. Fucking goddamn *hell.*

Dean twists his hand suddenly, a rough motion just on the sweet side of painful, and Jay arches into it and comes hard, vision going white around the edges.

It takes him a couple of gasping moments to come down enough to realize that he's gripping Dean's neck hard enough to bruise, to let go. "Jesus," he says, and he almost don't recognize his voice. "Sorry."

Dean pulls away and grins up at him. His hair is wrecked and his mouth is swollen and wet. He looks smug, sexy as hell. "Don't worry about it."

Jay breathes out a laugh, gets his hands under Dean's arms to haul him up until they're face-to-face. Dean comes willingly, laughing into a messy kiss, but he pulls away when Jay reaches down between them to unbutton his jeans. "Dude, you don't have to--"

Jay mouths the side of his neck, the stubbled curve of his jaw. "Shut up," he murmurs, working his hand inside, and Dean does.

The angle's awkward, but Dean feels too good all big and sweaty-warm pressed against him to change it. His cock is smooth and heavy in Jay's grip and he rolls his hips forward with a groan. Takes a minute to find a rhythm that works, but then he does and Dean's shoves himself in even closer, cursing in a low, breathless voice against the side of his neck.

He comes with a small broken noise, tense and shaking like he's falling to pieces. Jay gentles him through it, slides his free hand through

Dean's soft, short hair, cups the curve of his jaw. He's kind of expecting to get it slapped away, so it's a surprise when Dean turns his face blindly into the touch, lips parted, eyes closed, coming undone.

He drops his head forward onto Jay's shoulder for a long minute before pulling away, blinking. "So, uh."

Jay shakes his head and pulls his t-shirt down, wipes his hand clean on his jeans and tucks himself back in, zips up his fly. After a minute, Dean follows suit. He pulls himself into a sitting position and rubs the back of his neck, looking self-conscious and younger than Jay can remember ever seeing him. His bare belly is shiny with sweat and come, and he leans forward to grab his t-shirt out of the front seat and clean up. "So," he says again.

"Got a six-pack of beer back at the house," Jay says, keeping his voice neutral. "Could maybe use some help drinking it."

Dean's quiet long enough that Jay's sure he's gonna say no, but then he grins, sharp and sudden and real. "What the hell, sure. I'll follow you there."

***

So, he fucked a guy. Because he wanted to, not to pay the rent or make bail. That's different.

There's a part of Dean that wants to poke it over like a sore tooth, but seriously? Fuck it. He got off, Jay got off; his bones still feel heavy and warm and the edge of his temper has worn down enough that he doesn't feel like breaking everything he sees.

Jay hands him a beer, and he takes it, crossing his feet on the upturned five-gallon bucket in front of his chair. The lights are off on the porch, but the moon's high enough that he can see the shine on the Impala and the chrome on Jay's old truck, the dark tangle of trees along the edge of the yard. "Thanks."

He gets a quiet, flickering smile in return, and he pops the cap off, takes a long drink. Cheap beer, mostly cold and bubbles that taste good on his tongue, soothe away the lingering soreness in his throat, 'cause it's been a while since he did that.

Last guy he sucked off was some middle-aged stockbroker with wings of gray in his hair and a fat wallet. It was a few years ago, and he didn't much like it at the time. Didn't expect to like it tonight, either, but apparently his dick had other ideas.

Maybe he's developing an oral fixation or something. Of course, that wouldn't explain what he's still doing here, or why he keeps looking at Jay out of the corner of his eye, his stillness and his thoughtful expression, his long fingers on his beer bottle and the way his thin t-shirt settles on his body. He looks *good,* is the thing, and Dean doesn't have the first clue what to do with that.

Jay lights up a cigarette and doesn't say anything, and there's enough restlessness left in Dean that he sets his beer down, turns toward Jay's silent profile, and says, "So, what's the deal, here?"

Jay shrugs, slow. "You can stay, if you want. Reckon I got enough bacon and eggs for two. Or there's the motel down the road."

There's no pressure in his voice, just the offer. Take it or leave it. Dean rolls the beer bottle between his hands, gives himself time to think. The motel's twenty minutes from here, and it's already late. And for some reason the idea of walking up to the desk and getting a room with no Dad to drag him out of bed for three AM strategy sessions and no Sam to rag on his lame-ass fake ID's makes something a lot like panic twist in his belly.

Here, there's bacon and eggs. And maybe more sex. That'd be okay. "I guess I could stay," he says finally. "If you don't mind."

"Wouldn't have offered if I did," Jay says, and when Dean looks over at him, he's smiling a little.

***

He stays for almost a week that time, the first time. Borrows Jay's shed to detail the Impala, AC/DC blasting out of a boombox that's probably only a few years younger than he is, heat pounding down from a dry blue sky.

"Sam left," he tells Jay the second morning. Early morning, because Jay opens up the shop by himself. There's sun on the kitchen floor, coffee in a chipped mug in front of him, and beard burn on the insides

of his thighs. It's a warm not-quite-discomfort where the seam of his jeans rubs into his skin. "A couple of weeks ago."

"I figured," says Jay.

"Him and Dad--" Dean stops, shakes his head, drinks some coffee. Black as tar and about as tasty, but it'll sure as hell wake him up. It's an improvement over the dishwater crap Sam likes to brew, anyway.

Liked to brew. When he was still around to brew lousy coffee. Maybe he's poisoning his new Stanford buddies with it by now, who the fuck knows?

Jay lets the unfinished sentence cool in the air for a while, and then he stands, stretches, neck popping. He's thirty-five or so, Dean guesses, and he's in good shape, but there's still some stiffness in his joints. Crow's feet starting around his eyes, although that might just be the fact that he smokes like a chimney. That shit'll age your skin.

"I'm heading down to the shop," he says, instead of pursuing the conversation. "Y'all can tag along if you feel like it."

"Yeah," Dean says. "That'd be good."

***

It's like a blast from the past, hanging out behind Jay's shop and staring out at a stretch of dry scrubgrass leading up the hill out back. Four years, give or take. It's not a long time, in the grand scheme of things.

Definitely not long enough to get this tired. Fucking Christ. Last night was the first time he's really slept since Sam bailed. Maybe that's why he hasn't managed to work up any kind of respectable freak-out about sleeping with Jay. Too tired. And really, banging another guy is one of the least weird things about his life lately.

Anyway, he likes the guy, and Jay's not trying to coddle him into talking about anything, which already puts this about two steps above anywhere else he could have ended up.

***

Dad calls on Friday morning with instructions to meet up in Amherst. He sounds like he's aged about a thousand years in the past month, but at least he's not barking every word out like the drill sergeant he sometimes forgets he isn't.

"It's a poltergeist, from the sound of it," he says. "A nasty one. I'm gonna need your help, son."

"I'll be there," Dean says back, pulling on his jeans one-handed. He's careful not to give away by words or tone the relief that's filling him up like a warm bubble. Sam left, and that's just six kinds of jacked, but Dad's not gone. Not for good. Dad still needs him.

Jay's pouring himself a cup of coffee at the kitchen counter when Dean comes out, dressed and carrying his duffel. There's sweat dried sticky on his skin, but he can shower when he gets to Massachusetts tonight. The hickeys Dad won't even notice. Not like they're an unusual occurrence.

"Gotta hit the road," he says.

Jay nods, pulls a stained travel mug out of the cupboard and empties the rest of the pot into it. "Might as well take this with you, then."

Dean takes it, cradling the battered plastic in both hands. "Thanks, man. I--really. Thanks."

He doesn't just mean the coffee, and Jay's slow smile says that he knows that. "Anytime. You just take care of yourself."

"Yeah," Dean says, and grins, shifting the duffel strap into a more comfortable position on his shoulder. "Yeah, I'll do that."

***

Easter, 2003

"This fucker," Dean says happily on the other end of the line, *"he was fifteen feet long. At least."*

Jay tucks the phone under his cheek to light his cigarette. It's soggy

and not all that warm out on the porch and it ain't like Mae's around to yell at him, but it still don't feel right to smoke in her kitchen. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. Had Dad pinned down in the basement of this museum. I got a broken ankle, right? Can't freaking move, and there's this scaly son of a bitch about to take a chunk outta his face--" Dean pauses, long enough for a gulp of whatever it is he's drinking. Jay breathes out smoke on a chuckle. Sounds like the kid's three sheets to the wind already. Feeling no pain.

"So, this thing's gonna start chewing on his head, right? And there's me with no gun. Can't stand up, so I grab the nearest pointy thing I can get my hands on and I chuck it as hard as I can. Skewered him right through the eye. Saved Dad's life, honest to God. And then I look--" he starts cackling. *"I crawl over there and haul Dad out from underneath it, and I look, and it's a freaking umbrella."*

"An umbrella," Jay repeats dryly, but he's smiling. Hard not to, considering how damn pleased Dean sounds with himself.

"Cross my heart, man. I killed a lindworm with an umbrella."

"That's something else, all right."

"Are you shitting me? It was awesome. *Way cooler than Saint George and his pansy-ass spear."*

"Yeah," Jay says, shaking his head. Saint George. He's spending his Easter talking to a drunk ghostbuster about slaying dragons. Why the hell not. "Sounds like it."

Dean's silent a couple of minutes, and when he speaks again his voice is quieter. *"How've you been, anyway? Haven't talked to you in a while."*

Sometimes, Dean's a goddamn mystery to him. These phone calls don't happen all that often, but they're common enough. Dean don't mention the week he spent in Canfield back in August, and Jay don't let on that he spends any time at all reminiscing on it. Ain't been all that many guys for him in the past few years, because there ain't never gonna be anybody to replace Keith and Jay ain't looking. But somehow, Dean's managed to carve himself out a little spot all his own. Confuses the hell out of Jay.

"Been doing good," he says.

"Yeah?"

"Real good," Jay says. "Having a little bit of an Easter dinner with Mae's family. Nellie's on break from school."

She's on the other side of the kitchen window, jabbing at something on the stove with a scowl that could blister paint. Mae's a damn fine cook, but it don't look like her little girl's inherited the gift.

Still, it's a place to go for the holiday. Ain't something everybody has, and he'll choke down whatever charred-up meal she serves for the chance of seeing her smiling like a kid again. College is good for her. She seems easier these days. Less like a scared rabbit and more like the laughing little girl he remembers.

Dean's quiet long enough that for a minute Jay thinks maybe the call got dropped. *"Huh,"* he says at last. *"Forgot it was Easter. Maybe the gas station has some of those marshmallow chick things."* He laughs. *"Dude, Sammy used to love those things. This one year, he couldn't have been more than ten, we lifted like twelve packages of 'em from a 7-11, and he ate every one. Puked his guts out for an hour."*

Jay chuckles, but there's an unexpected nip of sadness in his chest. He could ask after Sam; maybe he's earned that right, but he don't. "Never got the taste for those myself."

"Yeah, me neither," says Dean. He ain't quite drunk enough to slur his words, but from the sound of it he ain't far off. *"Give me a bacon cheeseburger any day. But Sammy, man, that kid's got a sweet tooth like you would not believe. Like a hummingbird, or something. A really freakin' giant hummingbird."*

Jay was just gonna step out for a quick smoke, but he finds himself leaning back in his chair, bare feet kicked against the cool, damp porch, listening to Dean talk for a good twenty minutes before Nellie sticks her head out to call him back in.

"I gotta get going," he says after Dean wraps up a rambling, maybe-true story about a Ferris wheel and a couple of trained bears.

"Yeah," Dean says back, slurry and mellow. He's been sipping on something this whole time, enough to tilt him over from tipsy to

actually drunk. *"I guess I should head back over t' the bar, make sure Dad doesn't get himself arrested. Fuckin' holiday,"* he adds mildly. *"Shoulda remembered that. Good talkin' t'you, Jay."*

"Yeah," Jay murmurs. "You too."

***

Dean's not a great believer in introspection. There's too much about his life that he doesn't really have any interest in dwelling on, and anyway, what's there is there and no amount of navel-gazing is gonna change that.

So he doesn't spend a lot of time agonizing over what happened with Jay. He's not queer. Not that there's anything wrong with that, or anything, just that he isn't. It was a one-off kind of thing, because Jay's a friend, sort of, somebody he can trust not to stomp on him when he's down.

If Dad has any idea about his periodic calls to an 828 number, he doesn't bring it up.

They gank a pack of chupacabras down by the Mexico border that summer, swing up through Palo Alto to spy on Sammy for a couple of days once the fall semester starts. He's doing good, seems like. Far as they can tell from a distance, he's doing good. Filling out, putting some meat on that scrawny frame, and he's always with a bunch of people, talking, laughing, poring over geek books in the courtyard like one of those freakin' college pamphlets guidance counselors always have laying around. He doesn't notice them trailing him, and that's a good thing, Dean tells himself.

He seems good, though. Happy.

"We could go talk to him," Dean suggests after about a week of watching Dad watch Sammy do his college thing. "I mean, no big deal, just--"

Dad's already shaking his head, crumpling up his takeout wrappers and stuffing them in the bag. They're standing against his truck in the early morning sun, outside Sam's dorm. Mist is lying low across the ground, and everything looks too shiny and clean to be a part of any world Dean belongs to.

"We've already hung around here too long," Dad says. "Time to be moving on. I'll give you a ride back to the Impala, and then we're heading up the coast."

Dean sighs. "Yessir."

Chapter 5

They spend most of the fall in this town with pretensions of being a city somewhere in southern Montana, doing research. Or, well, Dad spends it doing research and Dean spends it going slowly out of his mind with boredom.

Freakin' research geeks. Sam, too. Spends a solid five years bitching every waking moment about the job, and then winds up in college doing the same damn thing. *Research.*

Dean prefers the hands-on parts, himself. Quiet-time leaves him with too much time to think. He details the Impala, fixes the plumbing of the little shack that they're holed up in (belongs to a friend of Bobby's, although he's not entirely clear on whether the friend actually knows they're staying here), re-builds his EMF meter, and even makes a half-assed effort at reading through the spellbooks for Dad. It's mostly a waste of time. He speaks enough French to get around and his Spanish is almost fluent, but without Sammy there to help him pick through the grammar, the old (freaking *handwritten*) Latin tomes make him want to break his head on the table.

The one good thing about it is that it keeps Dad occupied until November second has come and gone. Last year--their first year without Sammy--was a bad one. Took him two freaking days to get Dad out of jail that time, and he still hasn't asked about the dents in the grill of the truck. Piles of dusty books are an improvement over that, he guesses.

It's mid-November when he finally runs out of ways to kill time around the house and decides to sample what the town has to offer. Test out a few theories, as it were. If he weren't so fucking bored, this would probably seem like a really bad idea, but he is, so it doesn't.

"Going out," he calls on Friday, already on his way out the door. Dad glances up briefly from the stack of books piled on the kitchen table, liberally salted with notes in his chicken-scratch handwriting.

"That's my coat."

Dean grins, shrugs, settling the old leather on his shoulders. Like armor. He feels like there's a live wire running under his skin, giddy and dangerous for no reason he can think of. "Yes it is, sir."

For a minute he's expecting to get barked at, but Dad just sighs. "Get out of here, Dean. Go blow off some steam."

"Happy to oblige."

"And don't get arrested. I have better things to do with my time than sweet-talk you out of a drunk and disorderly."

Dean slaps his chest, affects an offended look. "I would never."

Dad snorts and opens another book with a pointed *thump,* and Dean gets out of there.

***

There's a grand total of one gay bar in this town, and it looks pretty much the same as any other place. Jukebox, pool tables, nothing fancy. The dance floor lights up, though, and Dean can't decide if that's incredibly cool or the lamest thing he's ever seen.

It's not like everybody in here's gay, either, but there are guys dancing with guys, slow and grinding to the beat of the music, which is some alternative pseudo-rock emo crap that Sammy would probably love. There are girls dancing too, dancing together like they mean it and not like they're trying to get anybody to watch. It's still pretty hot, though.

Fuck, he's in so far over his head.

Still, he hasn't grown up the way he did without learning how to fit in anyplace he happens to be, how to slide into the crowd like he belongs. It's Jay he's thinking of, even though Jay's a long way from the first guy he's fucked. Jay woudn't fit in here any better than he does, he thinks, although he probably doesn't really know the guy well enough to say for sure.

He thinks about Jay sitting on his barstool at Rocky's with a beer in one hand, one of his toxic cigarettes in the other and a polite *fuck-off* expression on his face, and yeah. No way in hell would Jay fit in here. That makes him feel better, for some weird reason.

Jesus, this is stupid. He should just leave. There must be eleven bars

in walking distance of here; he could go find himself a pool game and a girl. Something easy.

There's a guy a couple of seats away, watching him.

He's about Dean's height but not quite as broad, blond hair, dark eyes. Not bad, if you're into that kind of thing. Which Dean is...maybe. Fuck. He doesn't know.

The bartender plonks another whiskey soda down in front of him.

"I didn't order that," Dean says, but he already knows how this game goes. From the other end of it, usually, but, well. Not always.

The bartender smiles. He's bald on top and his t-shirt is too tight, but he seems like an alright kind of guy. Dean likes bartenders, as a general rule, and not just because they control access to the booze. "Fella over there paid for it," he says, and jabs a thumb at Blond Dude.

"Of course he did," Dean mutters, but the bartender's already working his way down to the other end of the room. Blond Dude is still watching him, and for a second Dean considers setting the glass down and hightailing it out of the bar, dignity be damned.

Instead, he wraps his fingers around the glass, condensation cool on his skin, and meets the guy's eyes with a smile.

***

He gets home early enough to get a raised-eyebrow look from Dad, sweat cooling on his skin, knees sore from the alleyway pavement, still distressingly sober despite the whiskey he tossed back to get the taste out of his mouth.

"Have fun?" Dad asks dryly, and Dean shrugs. It's not like it was bad, or anything. Blond-Dude-whose-name-he-didn't-ask wasn't rough with him, murmured things like *god* and *so good* instead of *cocksucker* and *slut.* Returned the favor, too, and didn't complain when Dean pulled his hair. Kissed him afterward, said *maybe I'll see you around.*

It wasn't bad.

He's still not gonna do it again.

***

They swing up through South Dakota to return Bobby's books, and it takes all of twenty minutes for Dad and Bobby's customary sniping to morph into an out and out screaming match. Dean makes three wildly unsuccessful attempts to intervene, then takes a beer and goes out on the front porch to hang out with the most recent of Bobby's junkyard dogs. It's yellow, shaggy, and ugly as sin, but it licks his chin and then flops down with its head in his lap, a friendly weight while he drinks his beer, watches a couple of crows pecking at something out in the yard, and listens to Dad and Bobby call each other names at increasing volume.

When Dad storms out onto the porch with Bobby armed and hot on his heels, Dean gives the dog a scritch behind the ears, dumps out his beer, and follows them out to where the cars are parked.

"...and your damned pigheaded crusade, Winchester, I ain't gonna be a part of it!"

"Fine," Dad snarls. He's shifting his weight like he wants to throw a punch, and Dean really hopes he doesn't try. Bobby probably just has birdshot in that gun, but he still doesn't feel like spending tonight picking it out of Dad's ass.

"Get the hell off my property," Bobby snaps finally.

"Glad to," Dad says, and cuts a glance at Dean. He lifts his hands, telegraphing *leave me out of this* with all his might.

Bobby glances at him too, craggy face unreadable, then makes a noise like an irritated bear, turns, and stomps back toward the house without another word.

"Let's go," Dad says, and Dean nods and digs out his keys.

***

In late April of '04, there's a band of Spriggans wreaking havoc in Athens, Ohio, and Dean's life gets fucked up yet again.

He meets Cassie in the OU library, looking like a grade-A freak with his clothes inside-out and a heavy iron crucifix dangling from his neck, waiting for the building to close so he and Dad can break into the basement and clean out the nest. She's finishing up a piece for her internship at the Athens News, and he's pretty sure the only reason she doesn't hassle him about his getup is how sleep deprived she is. Smart as hell, though, and fucking gorgeous even wearing Donald Duck pajama pants with two pens tucked behind her ear and three-day circles under her eyes.

They talk for an hour before the library closes, and when it turns out that the damn faeries have spread all over the city, Dean doesn't even complain once. There's at least a dozen nests for them to clean out. That's a couple weeks of work at least.

Dad gives him a suspicious look when he grins at the news, but Dean ignores it. Cassie's--damn. Something else.

Man, that girl gets him to go to a poetry reading. And *like* it.

He seriously should have fucking seen it coming.

***

It takes them three and a half weeks to clear the infestation, and they manage it without major injury or arrest, which is a minor miracle all on its own. Dean spends most of the time walking around with a stupid grin on his face, and Dad's kind enough to leave off the ribbing, for the most part.

"Got a contact to meet down in Georgia," he says on Thursday of the fourth week, while they watch the last nest of the ugly little monsters burn in an abandoned lot on the outskirts of the city.

Dean sighs. It's not like he hasn't been expecting this, but that doesn't make it suck any less. He has Cassie's cell number, and she has his, but he knows from long experience how this goes. He'll drop in, maybe a year from now, and she'll have her own life and no place in it for him. That's just the way it is.

"Anyway," Dad says, and there's something in his voice that manages to sound simultaneously shrewd, smug, and proud. "She's not too fond

of young fellas with smart mouths."

Dean squints over at him. The streetlamps are all broken out here, and the fire's down to embers. It's hard to read Dad's face in the dark. "Sir?"

"Maybe it'd be better if you stuck around here. This could be a real good contact for some hard-to-find weapons. I wouldn't want it to get messed up just because she decides she doesn't like your face."

"Everybody likes my face," Dean says, but it's all he can do not to start bouncing with glee like a twelve-year-old girl at her first school dance.

Dad snorts. "Meet me in Atlanta by Monday," he says, and that's the end of that conversation.

***

It's a temporary reprieve and he knows it, but it gets him thinking. If he can talk to her--if he can make her understand--maybe he can *have* this. Not all the time; he's not built to spend his life playing house when there's work that needs doing, but maybe--

Hell, half the military has somebody waiting for them at home, why not Dean?

***

They go out with a couple of Cassie's friends that night, get tipsy on girly drinks that Dean would never in a million years drink in front of Dad or Sam. The booth's tiny, and she spends most of the evening sitting on Dean's lap, his arm settled around her slender waist, the smell of her cocoa-butter lotion in his nose.

They fuck in her bed in the small hours of the morning, slow and sweet, and afterward he brings her a glass of water and sits down on the mattress and says, "I have to head out on Monday."

She sets the glass down and puts her head on his thigh, smiles sleepily up at him. "You and your mysterious job," she says. "You ever gonna tell me what that is?"

Dean opens his mouth to say *traveling salesman* or *secret agent* or one of a dozen other pre-fabricated lines of bullshit, and then he shuts it again. Smooths his hand through the sex-tangled mess of her hair and thinks, *jesus, you pussy, tell the truth for once in your fucking life.*

So he does.

***

Ten minutes. That's all it takes. Ten fucking minutes to get from *no, seriously, what do you do for a living* to *Dean, this really isn't funny,* to *you know what, if you want to leave, just fucking tell me so.*

He stops trying to get her to listen to him when she starts throwing his clothes at him and telling him to get out, *get the hell out of my apartment you fucking lunatic--*

His boot catches him in the face, steel-toe splitting his lip wide open while he's trying to pull on his boxers. She's standing in the doorway of her bedroom, fierce and naked and still so fucking beautiful he almost can't look at her.

He puts a hand to his mouth, and his fingers come away bloody.

For a second, there's something like remorse in her dark eyes, and then she throws his other boot at him--at his feet, not his head--and turns around and slams the door without a word.

Dean spits a mouthful of blood out on her welcome mat and starts gathering up the rest of his stuff. It won't be the first time he's pulled his clothes on in the gray light of dawn on somebody else's front lawn. This isn't any different.

***

He stops for coffee on his way out of town, and he's a good thirty miles down I-77 when he notices that he's headed toward North Carolina, not Georgia. He should get off the next exit, turn around, drive down and meet Dad and--

Fuck it. Dad said be there Monday, he'll fucking be there Monday.

***

He rides into Canfield on the nose of a storm that afternoon, gray thunderheads rolling down the hill after him like his foul mood followed him all the way from Ohio. The whole town seems empty, the wind kicking up garbage in the streets and tearing new leaves off the trees.

Jay's closing up at the garage when Dean pulls the Impala in next to his truck. He climbs out, shakes the road-stiffness out of his muscles and leans up against the warm flank of his car to wait. The lot is empty but for the two of them, and the air smells like rain.

There's no way in hell Jay could have known he was coming, but he does a good job of pulling his reaction. He's probably a good poker player.

"Hi," Dean says, hauling a smile onto his face. "Surprise?"

Fuck if he knows what he's doing here, but the way Jay smiles back makes the hard, cold knot that's been riding in the pit of his stomach all day uncoil just a little.

"That it is," Jay says easily. "Can't say as I was expecting you."

"Yeah." Dean rubs the back of his neck, suddenly self-conscious. "Sorry. I'm just having a freaking craptastic day. I was hoping I could stop and have a drink with somebody who doesn't want to throw anything at my head."

"Got a case in the fridge back at my place, guess I could share. So long as you don't mind the cheap stuff."

His voice is mild, but his gaze flickers over Dean's face, catching on his mouth. Split lip, Dean remembers. Right. He slides his tongue over it, tentatively, winces. "If it's cold and alcoholic, I won't complain."

Jay smiles. "Reckon I can guarantee that much."

He looks half-amused, gray-blue eyes hooded, a thumbprint of grease on his temple like he tried to rub away a headache without washing his hands. His hair's too long and he's about three days overdue for a shave. And--seriously? Fuck it. Dean's not always the most self-aware person on the planet, he knows that, but he's pretty sure he didn't

drive a hundred and fifty miles out of his way and risk Dad's wrath to help Jay drink a case of cheap beer.

He crosses the space between them, reels Jay in for a kiss. It's fast and brutal, the taste of coffee and cigarettes and the sharp spark of pain where his lip is split.

When they pull apart, Jay drops his forehead against Dean's, chuckles quietly. His hand's found its way up to the nape of Dean's neck, warm knotted fingers that smell like motor oil. "You remember the way back, I take it."

"Yeah," Dean admits. "I'll follow you."

Seriously, he has no idea what the hell he's doing.

***

It's raining when they get to the house, fat droplets breaking against the gravel driveway. Dean cuts the engine, closes his eyes for a long minute before he climbs out.

Jay meets him in the strip of ground between their two vehicles, hair already going soggy with the rain. It takes two strides for Dean to get him pressed up against the side of his truck, slipping a leg between his thighs, all solid heat bleeding through wet clothing, hands catching on his denim-clad hips. Jay doesn't talk. Doesn't ask what the hell's going on, doesn't suggest getting inside before they catch their death of cold, just drags Dean into another hard kiss while the sky opens up above them.

Dean spares a moment to be grateful that Jay's house is far enough out of town that nobody's likely to happen by, and then his jeans are sliding down his hips and Jay's mouth has moved to the hollow of his throat and he is totally fucking done thinking.

It's a while before they make it inside.

***

The storm hits that night, wind hard enough to crack the tree branches and drive sheets of rain against the side of the house. Dean

doesn't mind storms, but it's still kind of nice to have Jay sleeping quietly on the other side of the bed, a warm weight that he can reach out and touch, like an anchor.

He hasn't just *slept* with all that many people, and never with a guy (unless you count Sammy, back when they were kids, which he doesn't. Little fucker liked to kick). It's okay. Different, but okay.

***

They climb up on the roof the next morning to replace the shingles that got torn off by the wind. It feels good, sitting on the edge of the roof with a beer, feet kicking in the air over the porch and Jay's leg a long warm line against his. They talk about the shop, the new tranny Dean had to put in the Impala last spring, the weather. The hunt. Jay isn't a hunter, won't ever *be* a hunter--he's got more common sense than that, Dean thinks--but he likes to know what's out there. Just in case. Always be prepared.

"You were a boyscout, weren't you?"

"Got the uniform to prove it," Jay says, smiling so bland that it's impossible to tell whether or not he's screwing around. Dean steals his beer, just in case, and Jay laughs and doesn't try to steal it back.

He also hasn't asked what the hell Dean's doing there, and that's probably one of the main reasons Dean's still here at all. Well, that and the sex. Which is another thing they're not talking about, thank fucking Christ.

Jay's got his head tilted back to look up at the sky boiling gray above them. He's shirtless even though it's not all that warm, and from this angle Dean can see the devil dog tattooed in faded blue ink on his bicep, the old shrapnel scars spanning across the top and back of his right shoulder. His dogtags bounce against his sternum.

The overgrown backyard is stretched out green and tangled below them, and Dean's clothing feels like it's wilting against his skin from the humidity. Jay's thigh is pressed up against the his, carelessly close even though there's plenty of room up here. He can feel heat bleeding through two layers of clothes, smell clean sweat and cigarette smoke.

It totally shouldn't be hot, but it kind of is anyway. And hey, fuck it,

not like there's anybody here to see. Dean purses his lips for a moment, considering, then sets his beer down in the gutter trough.

"So," he murmurs, dropping his head against Jay's shoulder, mouth to skin. "Roof's pretty flat."

Maybe Jay knows him better than Dean gives him credit for, because he chuckles and reaches over to squeeze Dean's thigh firmly. Doesn't try to move away, though. "I don't think so."

Jay's shoulder is warm, already showing a reddish farmer's tan around the edges of the scars. Dean kisses one of them, then leans in to suck a slow hicky into the softer skin at the junction of his neck. "Come on."

"Good way to end up with a broken neck," Jay says. He's still not moving away and his voice is suspiciously raspy. Dean grins.

"Only if we fall."

"You got some kind of death wish," Jay mutters, but he doesn't make any effort to stop Dean from undoing his jeans and reaching inside.

"Nah." Dean curls one leg over Jay's thigh to keep him in place, feet still dangling in the no-man's-land above the porch. It feels shivery and dangerous in a really fucking awesome kind of way. "I really don't."

He takes his hand away long enough to lick a wet stripe down the center of his palm, then takes a hold of Jay's cock and starts jerking him long and slow. Jay shudders and stops protesting, head falling back, lean bare torso forming a perfect arc from the points of his elbows digging into the shingles to the flat expanse of his belly to his cock, slick with spit and pre-come, sliding in Dean's hand. He's shifting a little, like he's suppressing the urge to thrust up into it, and Dean bites the slope of his shoulder, less gentle this time, speeds up the pace until Jay's gasping, shaking, coming with a low, explosive,*"fuck."*

Dean kisses the purpling hickey he just made, then pulls his hand away and wipes it on his jeans. "So."

He means it to sound cocky, but it comes out low and hoarse instead. He can feel Jay's leg flex under his, the warm shudders of a body still coming down from the peak, and then Jay laughs, short and amused. "You are something else."

"Aw, I bet you say that to all the girls."

"Kind of a smart-mouthed little prick, ain't you?"

"Hey, there's nothing little about my--" Jay shuts him up with a kiss, and Dean lets himself be silenced. He's kind of distracted anyway, and he makes a little incoherent noise of protest when Jay pulls back.

"Come on, let's climb down before you get any more smart ideas."

"I have *awesome* ideas, and it's not like you were complaining. Much. And anyway--"

Jay finishes tucking himself away and shoves Dean's leg off of him. "I'll blow you, but I ain't doing it on the goddamn porch roof."

"Well," Dean says. "When you put it like that."

***

Jay shoves him up against the front door before it's even all the way shut, and Dean would love to be smug about that, but it's a little hard--ha--with Jay's tongue in his mouth, one muscular leg sliding between his thighs. Jay's not exactly a huge guy, but he's plenty strong enough to get Dean pinned to where he can't shake loose without some serious effort, which probably shouldn't turn him on the way it does.

"So, you were saying?" Dean says when they come up for air. He's pleased to hear that his voice only sounds a little uneven.

"Shut the hell up," Jay murmurs good-naturedly, but he's sliding down to his knees, so Dean lets his head fall back and braces his palms against the door and stops talking back, at least for the time being.

***

They make it out of their clothes and into the bedroom eventually. It's slower that time, gentler, and it's not like any of this is really new to Dean but somehow that's what it feels like.

Maybe it is different. A little different. He's fucked more women than he can count, but his experience with guys has been pretty much limited to reeking alleys and the backseats of cars and on one occasion he generally chooses not to remember, the sheriff's office in some backwoods jail.

And this.

The pillowcase is cheap cotton, a little nappy, rough under his cheek. He's holding onto the corner of the mattress so hard his fingers are starting to cramp, shaking like he's terrified and more turned on that he can remember being in a long time. Jay kisses the nape of his neck and smooths a rough hand down his flank, and fuck, he's *used* that move before, on women.

The *snap* of a bottle closing, and Jay's fingers are cool with slick and slow, too fucking *slow*. Dean curses and shoves back against it, too far gone to even care what he looks like right now.

"Stop fucking around and *do* it already," he hisses, letting go of the mattress to reach blindly behind him and grab for Jay's hip. He holds on tight, fingers pressing deep enough to make the point, and Jay laughs quietly.

"Easy," he murmurs in Dean's ear, fingers twisting to find the spot that makes his back arc and the breath leave his lungs like he's been punched. "Just be easy now."

"I look like a chick to you?" Dean gasps. Jay chuckles again, warm against the top of his shoulder, and then there's the crinkle and tear of a condom wrapper and hands on the inside of his thighs easing his legs apart--fingers still a little sticky, warm, almost familiar by now. This is almost familiar by now.

Jay moves like he knows what he's doing, not rough but *sure*. He waits for Dean to breathe through the stretch and burn of it, murmuring things Dean can't quite hear over the rush of blood in his ears, and when he does start to move it's slow, a smooth easy roll of the hips.

It feels good. Fuck, it feels really good, and Dean breathes out and lets go.

***

Afterward, he feels giddy and a little high, like a fuse blew somewhere in the depths of his brain.

"I think you broke me," he mumbles, gazing muzzily up at the ceiling. There's a water stain shaped like Montana on the tiles over the bed. Jay snorts. He's sprawled out with his cheek resting on Dean's belly and an arm flung carelessly over his hips. For some reason, this feels more intimate than the sex they just had, but he is way too fucking comfortable to care.

"You alright?" Jay asks quietly after a while, and Dean rolls his eyes at the ceiling.

"Orgasms are a real hardship for me, but I think I'll live." His hand is in Jay's hair, and he's not quite sure how it got there. The sun is sinking low in the sky and there's a window cracked to let in the breeze and the sound of crickets. Jay looks loose and half-asleep, stretched out like a big cat on the faded sheets, tan sliced through here and there with old scars.

He could be a hunter, by his body. He was a soldier. He moves and thinks and breathes in ways that are familiar to Dean, which is maybe why none of this is freaking him out the way he still feels like it should.

Dean dozes on that thought for a while, and the next time he's fully awake there are long shadows striping across the bed and his belly is rumbling with hunger. He feels sore and kind of gross, but food is a priority right now.

"Hey," he mumbles. His hand is resting heavy on the back of Jay's neck, and he gives him a little shake.

Jay grunts and lifts his head. His eyelids are heavy and the red sunset catches in his lashes and the stubble on his cheeks. He licks his lips, blinks. It's maybe the most relaxed Dean's ever seen him. "Yeah?"

"'M hungry."

Jay blinks again. "I got frozen pizza, I think."

"Nah," Dean decides. "Pancakes."

"It's dinnertime."

"So?"

Jay chuckles and pushes himself into a sitting position. "Fine. Pancakes. You're cooking 'em."

Dean grins. "I can do that."

***

Turns out Dean actually can cook, which surprises Jay more than it maybe ought to. He does it naked, too, totally unself-conscious. He don't turn the light on, but the light of the sinking sun is enough to show up a whole bunch of scars laced across his skin. Way too many scars for somebody as young as him. Some of them Jay knows the story to, like the gouge that runs from the top of Dean's right kneecap all the way up to his hip, the result of a pissed-off poltergeist and his little brother's first attempt at sutures. Some of them, he has no clue.

"You're gonna get hot grease someplace you don't want it," he observes from the bedroom doorway, watching Dean flip a pancake onto the waiting stack.

Dean laughs. "Nah, I got skills."

"Yeah?"

"You have no idea."

"I got some idea."

A snort. *"Cooking,* man."

Jay laughs, pulls his jeans back on and tosses his sticky t-shirt in the direction of the laundry pile. "Smells good," he offers.

Kid could light up a room with that grin.

***

Nellie shows up around noon on Saturday to drop some stuff off for Jay, but she's kind of skittish around Dean and doesn't stay long.

Considering that he shot up a ghost in her front yard the last time they ran into each other, Dean can't entirely blame her.

The town's dead on Sunday, but Jay opens the shop all the same. For lack of anything better to do, Dean drives down with him.

George is still working the front office, and he gets this lip-curl on his face when Dean wanders in. Kind of makes Dean want to punch him in the face, which is a feeling he got pretty familiar with the last time he was working here.

Instead, he bats his eyes, cocks his hip, and pouts at the skeevy asshole like he's Scarlett Johanssen instead of a mostly-bald pot-bellied mechanic with an attitude problem and bad teeth. "Hi, George."

George turns purple. Dean grins and follows Jay into the shop.

***

And then it's Monday. He wakes up with a headache that he can only partly attribute to the beers he put away last night and the sinking sensation of reality crashing down on his head. Three days of cars and beer and good sex and nothing to remind him of Cassie still aren't enough to get her out of his head, apparently.

He goes out into the living room to make the phone call, sinks down on the lumpy couch and indulges in a brief fantasy of telling Dad to shove it, that he's gonna stay in Nowheresville, North Carolina, and become a mechanic. Then he punches in the number.

Dad picks up on the second ring. "Dean."

Dean tucks the phone under his ear, stares at the cheapass fake-wood paneling on the wall behind the TV. "Hey, Dad."

That's it, but Dad hasn't had Dean covering his six for as long as he has without learning to read his voice. His tone sharpens immediately. "What happened?"

My life's a crock of shit, that's what happened. You know, the usual. "I'm heading out pretty soon," he says instead. "I'll be Atlanta by this afternoon."

"This afternoon." The tone's neutral, and Dean grimaces. Busted. Dad knows as well as he does that it's a ten hour drive from Cassie's apartment to Atlanta, and that's with a healthy amount of speeding. "Where the hell are you?"

"Canfield."

"You're in North Carolina."

"Yessir."

"What happened with Cassie?"

"She threw me out," Dean says, trying to make his voice even, light. Kind of like it's no big fucking deal, because it isn't. Spilled milk or whatever.

Yeah, he's doing just fine.

Dad doesn't answer for a while, sighs, finally. "Meet me at the Blue Robin Inn. Right off of I-85, room number's 320. I'll expect you there by three."

Dean pinches the bridge of his nose, wonders if he could get Jay to lend him another travel mug of coffee sludge even though he didn't bring back the last one back. "I'll be there."

He's about to hang up when Dad says, "Dean?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry. About Cassie."

Yeah, he definitely needs coffee. Maybe some prescription-strength painkillers. A sledgehammer to knock himself out with. "It's cool, Dad. I'll see you later."

He disconnects the call before Dad can say anything else.

Jay's awake when he comes back into the bedroom, but he doesn't say anything, just watches Dean gather up his clothes and stuff them in his duffel bag.

"I should get going," Dean says.

"I figured."

"I--" he lifts a hand, presses his knuckles into the ache knotting itself into his forehead. "Fuck."

Jay slides out of bed, pulls on a pair of crumpled jeans. "You alright?"

"Peachy."

"Yeah, I can tell."

Dean rubs his forehead again, drops his hands to his sides. Jay's just looking at him. "You never asked me why I came back here. You never ask."

"None of my business."

"I met this girl." He doesn't know he's gonna say it until the words are out of his mouth, but then he can't seem to stop talking. "Cassie. She's--man." How to explain Cassie? Gorgeous, funny Cassie, with the smart mouth and the attitude and the way she never once acted like she was out of his league.

And the fucking fantastic throwing arm. Can't forget that. He barks out a laugh. "So, I told her the truth. About what we do."

"She didn't take it well, I guess."

Dean rubs the healing split in his lower lip. Still stings like a bitch. "You could say that, yeah."

Jay nods. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah," Dean says again. He sort of wishes he had something in his hands to play with, focus on, because he's not entirely blind to the weirdness of discussing his woman troubles with the guy he's been banging for the past three days. Jay doesn't seem bothered by it, but Dean's not sure he'd be able to tell. "This is--I don't know, man."

He wants to apologize, but he's not sure what he has to be sorry for. Something, probably. He's no good at this shit.

"It is what it is," Jay says mildly. "You want me to fix you some coffee for the road?"

"I didn't bring your last cup back."

"I expect I'll survive. Come on."

It's not worth arguing. Dean slings the bag over his shoulder and follows Jay into the kitchen, leans against the sink while Jay fills the pot and turns it on. "Hey, Jay."

"Yeah?"

"You ever have somebody?" Jay goes still, the lean, tanned lines of his back tense. His hands flex on the countertop, and Dean adds, "I mean, it's not my business, but--"

"I did," Jay interrupts quietly. "Long time ago."

"What happened?"

He's got an idea, and the look on Jay's face when he glances up confirms it before the man even opens his mouth. "He met with an accident," Jay says, mellow voice gone precise and bitter. "The kind that involves a tire iron and a lonely stretch of road."

"I'm sorry," Dean murmurs.

Jay lifts a shoulder. "It was a long time ago," he says again. Like that makes any fucking difference. Christ, it's been twenty years since Mom, and Dad still hasn't come anywhere close to getting over it. That's not the kind of hurt that just goes away.

Still, it isn't his business to tell Jay how to handle his shit, so he doesn't push it, just settles himself back against the lip of the sink and watches Jay pour one of those cheap plastic mugs full of coffee. Their fingers brush when he hands the cup over, and Dean sets it down on the counter, leans in and kisses him on the mouth, slow and thorough.

It isn't a sexy kind of kiss. Something else, something Dean can't entirely get a handle on and isn't sure he wants to.

Jay brushes his cheek with his knuckles when they pull apart, an oddly tender gesture. His eyes are unreadable. "Y'all take care of

yourself," he says, just like the last time.

Dean kisses him again, then picks up the mug, letting the heat sink in through his fingers. "I'll see you around."

***

"That mechanic friend of yours lives in Canfield," Dad says that evening.

Dean doesn't pause loading the gun, but the shells suddenly feel slippery in his fingers. He doesn't look up. Can't. "Yeah. I was staying with him for a couple of days. To get my head on straight."

So to speak.

Dad's quiet, and for a long moment all Dean can hear is the rasp of his own breathing, loud like thunder. Then Dad's moving, a slow shift and rustle of flannel, and he reaches across the table to squeeze Dean's shoulder. The weight of his hand is so damn comforting that for a second Dean feels like a little kid again, and to his intense embarrassment, his eyes are burning.

"Let's hit the road," Dad says. "We got a lot of ground to cover before morning." Gives him a little shake, then lets go.

They don't talk about it again.

They both get arrested in a small town in South Dakota that Dean hasn't bothered to learn the name of. Bobby's only a couple of hours away, and if Dean called instead of Dad, he might be willing to drive down and bail them out so they don't have to scrap yet another set of ID's. It's just trespassing. No big deal.

Dad's a stubborn bastard, though, and he nurses a grudge like nobody else Dean's ever seen, except maybe Sam. They break out instead, bust the Impala and Dad's truck out of the impound and head back to California to check up on Sam without so much as a sniff in the direction of Sioux Falls.

They spend three days following Sam around and don't talk to him, either. Dean doesn't even bother suggesting it this time. He does pick the lock on Sam's mailbox to leave an envelope stuffed with twenties

in there, though. It's even odds that Sam will throw it in the garbage without opening it and Dad gives him this *look,* but he doesn't care. It's his job to look after Sam, even if the pissy bastard is too pigheaded to accept it.

He gets a phone call from a Stanford number when he's in the shower that night. The message on his voicemail is about five seconds of dead air, and nobody picks up when he calls back. Dean kind of wishes he was surprised.

***

Nellie graduates with her Associates the first week of June, and Jay ends up sitting in the crowd with Missy and Jake, mostly to keep Jake out of trouble. Man can't even stay sober for his own daughter's graduation.

He brings a couple of disposable cameras with him, and when he gets the photos developed later, there's about twenty of Nellie in her blue cap and gown, one of Jake snoring away on Missy's shoulder, two of Jay looking like a damn fool in a suit he ain't worn in years. There's also a couple of pictures of the '73 Mustang he did body work on a while back, and one of Dean sitting on the porch steps with a beer, looking faraway and still too pretty for his own good.

Jay shoves that one in his dresser drawer and drives up to the state pen to hand the rest of them off to Mae. The look on her face when she sees her little girl in that cap and gown puts it right out of his head.

"Two more years," he says, watching her trace the outline of Nellie's face with one slender finger. Her hair's grown out to its original mousy brown and there are more lines than he remembers around her mouth, but when she smiles at him it's just as pretty as it was back in high school.

"Thanks for bringing me these, sweetheart," she says, and reaches across the table to squeeze his hand.

Jay squeezes back. Probably a little too hard, but she don't complain. "Next time, I'll bring the girls with me."

***

It's August when Jake drives his old Silverado through a guardrail and rolls it down a hundred yards of rocky slope. He's dead before the engine quits, and that's about the only mercy in the whole sorry situation.

Nellie cries all the way up to Raleigh and all through the two-hour visit with her mama, but she buttons up on the way back and don't shed a single tear through the funeral.

Missy takes to sleeping in her sister's bed, even though she's almost twelve now and ain't done that in years. Jay stops by to help out around the house, and Nellie takes a job with a hospital over in Asheville. Says she can wait to move out of town, at least until Missy's out of school. It's a good enough job that the state don't give her much hassle about getting custody, so at least Missy don't end up shipped off to some foster family somewhere.

That should be the end of it, except for how three months in, there's cold spots and blown circuits turning up in the trailer. Nellie's car breaks down four times for no reason Jay can figure out, and around November Missy swears up and down that her daddy locked her in her bedroom and wouldn't let her out for three hours.

Time was, Jay would have said she was losing her marbles. He knows better now.

***

"Got a question for you," Jay says, and Dean slumps in his seat, shifts his grip on the phone, and sighs. That's an opening gambit that never goes anywhere good.

"Shoot."

"Salt and burn. That the only way to do for a spook?"

"The only sure-fire way," Dean admits. "Why, you got--"

He's talking to dead air. Even for Jay, that was abrupt.

North Carolina is fifteen hundred miles east of them, and they're on a

job now. Black dogs, and there are five people dead already. If Jay's got a ghost problem out there in Canfield, he's gonna have to take care of it himself. He's a smart guy. He can handle a ghost, and he can probably even avoid getting arrested for grave desecration.

Doesn't make Dean feel any better about the whole situation, though. If there's one thing he fucking hates, it's being helpless.

***

It ain't that he ever even liked Jake. Damn bastard was worse than useless, a drunken lump of a man who died with more flair than he ever lived. Just about figures that he wouldn't have the sense to get gone.

Which is why Jay's out in a cemetery at the ass-end of midnight, digging up a fresh grave. Good thing it's fresh enough that the dirt ain't packed to sod, 'cause that's a lot of digging and he ain't as young as he used to be. Ain't got quite the stamina, and maybe he oughta start thinking about cutting back on the smokes or something. He's winded by the time he moves enough dirt to get at the coffin, has to sit there for a minute listening to the night sounds out here in the back of nowhere. Owls in the woods. It's just lucky the graveyard ain't closer to town. He ain't got a clue how he'd explain this to the cops.

"This ain't right."

'Course, he shoulda figured Jake wouldn't just go in peace. He don't look like he's trying to make trouble, just leaning up against his own headstone with droopy hounddog eyes, but that could change.

"You're dead," Jay informs the ghost. "Time to move on."

"Ain't right," Jake repeats, and Jay sighs. 'Course the bastard has even less sense dead than he did alive. He gets the shovel down, pries the lid loose. Even though he's braced for it, the smell makes him recoil. Ain't much smells worse than a fresh corpse, and it's been a long damn time since he's had to deal with one. Specially of someone he knew.

Jake's body is waxy and bloated in his cheap suit, and Jay hold his breath while he douses it with lighter fluid and salt. Next to him, Jake's ghost looks on mournfully.

"I just want to be with my girls," he says while Jay digs a match out of his pocket. *"I just want to be there for my little girls."*

Jay looks the spook square in the eye while he lights a match. "Shoulda tried that when you were breathing," he says, and drops it in.

The stink of burning flesh clings like war-dust to his clothes even after he fills in the grave, and at home he strips down to his boxers and tosses his jeans and shirt in the trash before calling Dean back.

Dean don't complain about the hour or the way Jay hung up on him earlier, just settles in to tell a story about a couple of strippers and a cross-dressing policeman that probably don't have a shred of truth to it. Jay don't mind. Just the sound of a friendly voice is enough to unwind some of the sickness in his belly.

He don't know what to call this thing between him and Dean. It ain't love, that's for sure. Dean's got no room in his heart for anybody but his family, and any love Jay had in him died in the morgue when he had to identify Keith by the tattoo on his leg because his face was too beat-in to recognize. He's a little piece of comfort for Dean, and maybe that goes both ways. It ain't much, but it's something.

He's smiling when he hangs up.

***

Somehow, it ain't even that much of a surprise when Dean rolls into town during the first frost of the season, a week later. He's waiting outside the shop by his car when Jay finishes locking up, looking sheepish and a little defiant, like he ain't entirely sure of his welcome. Hands shoved into the pockets of his jeans more like he's trying to trap them than like he's bothered by the cold. He squints as Jay approaches. "Hey."

"Hey yourself," Jay says. "What brings you 'round these parts?"

Mike passes them on his way toward his truck, lifts a hand to Dean, and Dean waves back without looking away from Jay. "Just passing through. Thought I'd stop in and see how you were doing."

"Canfield does seem to be on the way to a lot of places."

"Yeah," Dean says, and suddenly there's a grin hiding in the edges of his mouth. "Funny about that."

Smartass. Jay finds himself smiling back reluctantly. "Good to see you, kid."

"You ever think maybe it's a little creepy to call me that, considering the nature of our relationship?" Dean asks, but the grin's all the way onto his face now, and Jay just chuckles.

"Made my peace with it a while back. What say we head over to Rocky's and grab a beer?"

"Sure," Dean says easily. "You're buying."

Jay bumps his shoulder, just friendly, and Dean slings a heavy arm around him and leaves it there. His body is warm and close, and Jay can smell smoke and leather. "My pleasure," he says, and means it.

***

He hangs around for almost two weeks that time. Ain't any kind of discussion; he sleeps in Jay's bed and cleans his way methodically through Jay's gun collection and rebuilds the engine of a '62 Thunderbird in the shop. Nobody hassles him. George lit out to Kentucky a while back, Mike's almost as bad a gossip as Marty but he ain't the confrontational type, and the new kid's too scared of Jay to make any smart remarks.

They drink beer and play darts down at Rocky's, fuck in every room in the house, and don't talk about anything important. Nellie comes around a few times, and after the second visit she even stops flinching every time Dean talks to her.

She's a tough kid. She's doing alright.

Dean's slower this time, calmer without the manic thread of nervous temper running through everything he does. Not happy, Jay thinks, but come to terms with his lot in life. Resigned, in a way Jay knows all too well. Kind of makes him sad, seeing that in the kid, but it ain't anything he knows how to fix.

He leaves on a pale, cold Monday morning with one of Jay's plastic

gas-station mugs full of strong coffee, sticks his hand out the window of the Impala to wave when he pulls out onto the road, and that's the last time Jay sees him for almost three years.

***

October, 2005

"New Orleans, I don't know, Dad. They get hurricanes down there." Dean grins. "Could be dangerous."

Dad doesn't even bother smacking him down. "There's a couple of rogue witches trying to summon back Katrina," he says tiredly, and Dean lets out a low whistle.

"That is a special kind of stupid, right there." He pauses. Dad's packing, fast and efficient like he always does, and his notes are already shoved in the back of his truck. "What about you?"

"I'm heading out west. Jericho."

"In California."

"That's right."

Dean looks down at the Desert Eagle spread out on the motel desk. There's sun beating in through the dusty windows and their room smells like lighter fluid, burnt coffee, and gun oil, and it's all so comfortable and *normal* that the sudden chill in his gut doesn't make any sense at all. "You gonna stop and see Sam?"

See Sam here meaning just exactly that and nothing more. Dad hasn't said a goddamn word to Sam in years, and it doesn't seem likely that that's gonna change anytime soon. It makes Dean's head ache every time he thinks about it, but the two of them are equally pigheaded in their own special ways and there's nothing he can do to force a happy reunion.

Much as he wants to shove them in a room together and make them duke it out like reasonable people.

"Maybe," Dad says. Later, Dean will remember the way Dad looks at him, serious and intense like he's memorizing Dean's face. Later, he'll

think that he should have known right then that something was up. "Think I'm gonna stop and see Jim on the way there. Call me up when you get the job finished, and I'll let you know where to meet up."

"Yessir," Dean says. "So. New Orleans, huh?"

"I got you a contact with a local voudou priestess," Dad says. "I expect you to be respectful."

"Am I ever anything but?"

"I mean it, Dean."

"Alright, alright, I'm kidding. I'll behave."

"Good." Dad shoulders his bag, hesitates for a moment, then reaches out to clap Dean's shoulder. "The room's paid up through tonight, but you should hit the road early tomorrow."

Dean nods, and Dad squeezes his shoulder and turns on his heel and walks out of the room.

***

The next day he's heading down to Louisiana, thinking mostly about spicy food and good liquor and whether he should try and swing by Canfield before he heads back west to meet up with Dad.

A month after that, he's in a cheap motel room with three bags of clothing that smell like smoke and Sammy curled up like a toddler in the other bed, making these hurt little noises in his sleep.

He flips his phone open, scrolls through his list of contacts, then flips it closed again without dialing.

***

Mae gets out just in time to see Missy start ninth grade, and they have a party at the trailer. Cake and balloons under a hot blue sky, and Mae squeezes him hard enough to crack his ribs when she gets there. It's a good day.

That night's the first time he coughs hard enough to bring up blood. Jay stares at the red splatter on the bottom of his bathroom sink for a second, then turns the faucet on to wash it down the drain.

His chest feels like someone scooped out his lungs and replaced them with a couple of hot, dry stones, and when he looks up at the mirror, his face looks pasty-pale and resigned. He knows what this is. Should have seen it coming, maybe, after the way his old man went back in '93.

It takes Mae and Marty both nagging him for a good six months before he gives in and goes to the doctor. He forgot how damn pigheaded the two of them can get together.

When he gets the diagnosis, he goes home and sits on the porch, looks out at the dry streambed along the edge of the road, the heat waves rising off the asphalt, the sagging fence that needs fixing up. Anything but the X-ray photo in his lap, with its picture of the death that's growing like a small sun down in his lungs.

He fills out a prescription for some heavy-duty painkillers the next day, turns down the doc's notion of chemo, and drives back to his garage to bitch Mike out for a botched transmission job.

And that's that.

Chapter 6

October, 2007

They're halfway across Oklahoma when Sam pulls his nose out of the gigantic book he's reading and asks where they're headed.

"East," Dean says, and turns the music up.

Sam reaches out and turns it down again. "I noticed that much, Dean. I was just wondering if we had a specific destination in mind."

"North Carolina."

"Why? What's in North Carolina?"

"It's a stop on the Dean Winchester Farewell Tour of the Lower Forty-Eight," Dean says, just to watch Sam try and fail to hide his bitchface. He grins. "Bobby has a psychic up in DC he wants us to talk to, and I thought I'd stop in and see an old friend while we're on the east coast."

"Who?" Sam asks, and Dean rolls his eyes.

"Nobody." He turns the radio back up. "Touch my tunes again and die, bitch."

They get almost fifty miles in peace and quiet (or Zeppelin and road noises, anyway) before Sam reaches out and turns the cassette player off haflway through "Ramble On."

"Dude," Dean says indignantly.

"Canfield," Sam says.

"What?"

"Canfield. You want to go to Canfield."

Dean shrugs.

"Well?"

"Yeah, so? Is that a problem?"

"No, it's just--" Sam makes a face, shakes his head. "No, that's cool. I just--I mean, we haven't been there since we were kids."

"You mean *you* haven't been there since we were kids," Dean corrects.

Sam cuts him a sidelong glance. "You have?"

"Couple of times. When you were at college." He leaves it at that. It's not that he's ashamed of it or anything, but Sam will try to be Mr. I-Support-Alternative-Lifestyles, which Dean is so not in the mood for. "He helped me through some rough patches. Jay."

"...right," Sam mutters. His tone makes Dean glance over, but he's turned away, staring thoughtfully out the passenger side window.

"Well, don't smother me with your enthusiasm or anything."

"No. No," and there's definitely something going on behind that puppy-eyed mug when Sam looks back at him. "No, I'm good. Lets go."

Dean reaches out and turns the volume up again, loud as it goes, in time for Robert Plant to belt out "...time to *ramble on!"*

Sam claps his hands over his ears, and Dean grins for three miles.

***

When they get to the motel that night, Sam pulls out another giant book and flops down on his bed with it while Dean goes out for food, and he's still reading it when Dean gets back. Dean lobs a cheeseburger at his head.

"You don't eat something, you're not gonna have energy for all that exciting studying you're doing. Which, by the way, had damn well better be about our next hunt, and not any skanky bitches who might be hanging around crossroads in the middle of the night."

"Ha, ha." Sam unwraps the burger and grimaces. "Dude, would it kill you to buy food that contains some kind of nutrients once in a while?"

"Hey, if you don't want it, give it here."

"Dean--"

"I don't need another lecture about my eating habits, Sam."

"That wasn't what I--" Sam looks down at the burger in his hands, shakes his head, and for some reason Dean's suddenly getting a really bad feeling about the direction this conversation is taking. "Dean."

"What?"

"You and Jay--"

Oh, fucking fuck. Dean glances up, quick and calculatedly indifferent, then looks back down at McDonald's bag in his lap. "Hm?"

"Were you--when we were kids, that summer we worked at the garage--" Sam's mouth works soundlessly for a second, and Dean takes a huge bite of his burger rather than help him out. "Was he just paying you to fix cars?"

Dean swallows his burger, wipes his mouth, slow and deliberate. "Uh, yeah?"

"So you weren't--"

"Weren't what?"

Sam's head bobs awkwardly. "You know."

Oh.

"No, Sam. Jesus. He's a good guy, it's not--" He sets the burger down. "It wasn't like that, man. I don't know why you'd think it was."

"Oh," Sam says in a small voice. He's looking down at his hands, and it's like all the pissiness just drained right out of him. It makes him look a lot younger, all of a sudden. "I just. I know you did. Sometimes."

Oh, fuck no. Sam doesn't know that. Sam doesn't know shit about that. That was the only fucking rule. It's not like he did it all that often, and there's no fucking way Sam could have known. Not really. Not for sure.

"Sammy, come on, you really think I'd--"

"I figured it out when I was in college," Sam says, talking right over him. He laughs, a weird, dry little sound. "You always took care of the money, when we were kids. Even when Dad was around, you remember? I never realized--I mean, I was a kid, I didn't think about how much things cost. I didn't work it out."

"Yeah, well, you always sucked at math," Dean says lightly. His chest feels tight, panicky, and he's fighting the urge to deck Sam and run outside, hide in the Impala until this conversation becomes a bad dream. Sam would probably just follow him, though.

"Not that much." Sam sounds sad. "I just know that we'd be down to peanut butter scrapings and the landlord would be riding our asses for rent and you'd disappear for a couple of hours and suddenly we'd have enough to tide us over. And you got picked up in Detroit for soliciting an undercover officer. Back in '94."

It's true, but there's no way Sam should know about that. Even at fifteen, Dean wasn't a fucking moron. He gave them a fake ID. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I hacked your file. They ran your mugshot through facial recognition software after you hit the FBI's Most Wanted," Sam says, still in that weirdly gentle voice. "It picked up a lot of your old arrests."

Oh, that's just awesome. "So it's some dude who looks like me."

"Dean, I saw the picture."

"Sammy--"

"Why didn't you tell me?"

He gives up. "I don't know, dude, you were eleven."

"I could have helped."

"Right," Dean snorts. "My kid brother hustling the perverts in friggin' Highland Park, that's just what I wanted. We weren't that broke."

"Broke enough for you to do it."

"That's different. It was my--"

"If you say it was your job, so help me God, I will break your nose," Sam hisses. He sounds suddenly furious, but that's okay with Dean. It's a lot better than the kicked-puppy look, anyway.

"You're such a drama queen." Dean scoops a couple of fries out of his bag and pops them into his mouth. Salty, greasy deliciousness. Sam's just staring at him, like he's expecting Dean to have a long-overdue breakdown in this chintzy little motel room with peeling blue wallpaper. "Sam, it was a long time ago, okay? I'm over it."

"You don't do it anymore? You swear?"

Dean rolls his eyes. "Yeah, I swear. Too old, anyway."

Sam's mouth twists at that, but he mercifully doesn't push it. "And Jay--?"

"Man, I'll pinky-swear if that'll make you feel better. Jay never once paid to fuck me." Which is not to say that Jay never fucked him, but that's none of Sam's business. "I just want to have a drink with an old friend. That's all."

Sam stares at him for a long moment, wearing that squinty-eyed expression that makes him look like he's trying to bore through Dean's head with his eyes. Like Cyclops or something. Dean eats another handful of fries, calmly, and Sam finally sighs. "Okay. I believe you."

He says it like an absolution.

"Eat your dinner," Dean tells him.

***

They pack up the next morning without Sam bringing up Detroit again, and in return Dean buys him a coffee and pretends to ignore his mournful little glances.

It's late afternoon by the time they make it to Canfield. Dean drives slowly down the main drag, looking out the windows at a town gone just a little unfamiliar. Lawlers is closed, and there's a shiny new building in place of the tumbledown little post-office. Out of the

corner of the eye, he can sense Sam watching him, but they don't speak.

Jay's truck isn't at the shop.

Not a big deal, it's been a couple of years and he could have went and bought a new one. But when he goes inside, there's a new kid he doesn't know working the desk and Jay's nowhere to be found. The kid, a skinny, pimpled dropout with a nametag that reads *Stve,* shrugs when Dean asks where Jay's at. "I dunno, man. Not here."

"Thanks a lot," Dean says. "You've been a big help."

The door shudders when he kicks it, but he doesn't even think *Stve* notices. Fucker.

"Is he there?" Sam asks when Dean gets back to the Impala.

"Nope."

"So, uh, what--"

"Gonna head over to Rocky's. See if Marty's around, maybe he'll know what's up."

"Couldn't he just have gone home early?" Sam asks.

"Doesn't sound like him," Dean says absently, putting the car in reverse. Sam doesn't say anything else, but his thoughtful stare gets even more thoughtful. Dean ignores it even harder.

***

Rocky's is still there, a squat brick building perched on the corner of two crumbling streets, gravel parking lot stretched out behind, mostly empty. Sam opens his mouth when Dean parks across the street, but when Dean cuts him a look he seems to think better of whatever it was he was gonna say. Good.

The door opens inward, and the change from light to dark is sudden enough that Dean's left blinking and squinting, which is probably why he walks straight into the solid bulk of a body just inside. The guy stumbles, curses, and shoves him back; it's only Sam's hand on his

shoulderblades that keeps him from landing on his ass.

"Shit," Dean says. "Sorry, man--"

"Watch where you're goin'," the other guy snarls and ah, fuck, he knows that voice. Not in a good way. He blinks, willing his eyes to adjust and yeah, sure enough, it's that asshole Earl Dempster, squinting and unsteady on his feet even though it's barely after five.

Age hasn't improved him, but sad to say it looks like there isn't anything wrong with his memory. And, well, Dean's a memorable kind of guy. Sometimes that's a good thing.

Sometimes it's not.

"I know you," Earl says, swaying dangerously where he stands. Dean sighs. Knock the guy on his ass one time-- "You're that cocksucker usta hang around Jay, aintcha?"

Beside him, Dean can sense Sam going aggressively still. He doesn't even have to turn in that direction to know the incredulous scowl that's currently gracing his brother's face, and he kicks Sam's foot warningly before aiming a bright, toothy smile at Earl. "That's me."

Earl hawks, spits a wad of chewing tobacco at the floor. Way classy. His beady little eyes are looking Dean up and down, assessing. Dean isn't worried, wouldn't be even if he didn't have six and a half feet of pissy little brother making disgruntled noises to his left. "Maybe we don't let faggots like you in here no more, you ever think about that?"

"Dean," Sam says quietly, and Dean stomps on his foot again. Harder, this time.

"Last I checked, it said 'Rocky's' over the door, not 'Dumbshit Inbred Asshole Bar and Grill,' he says to Earl. "But, hey, if you want to take it outside--"

For a minute, it looks like Earl's gonna take the bait. Dean lets his hands curl into fists, stance shifting. Sam makes another small annoyed sound, and Dean watches Earls eyes flicker between the two of them before he finally, reluctantly, steps back.

"Fuckin' queers ain't worth the trouble," he mutters, and spits again. Dean smirks, steps around him to sit down at the bar. The barstools

are new, and the moth-eaten moosehead over the mirror is finally gone, but Marty's still there, wiping down a beer mug at the other end with a rag that looks like it might have survived the Vietnam War.

"Dean," Sam says again, and Dean ignores him firmly, lifts a hand to signal Marty.

"Hey, barkeep!"

"Winchester?" Marty says, setting the glass down and bustling over. He's lost what little hair he had and his left eyelid is drooping like an old dog's, but other than that he looks just like Dean remembers. It's a little sad how comforting that is.

Dean smiles. "In the flesh."

"Damn, son. Never thought I'd see you around again."

"Yeah, well, I can surprise you," Dean says cheerfully. Next to him, Sam does a bad job of suppressing a snort. "Don't know if you remember my brother, Sam--"

"Good to see ya," Marty says, holding out one knotted hand.

Sam shakes it. Always the polite little college boy, even when he's broadcasting *what the fuck* like a freaking radio tower. "Likewise."

"Two Coors?"

"That'd be great," Dean says before Sam can open his mouth, and Sam makes a halfhearted face at the beer when Marty hands it over. "So, uh--"

"Reckon you're here looking for Jay."

"Yeah," Dean says. "We stopped by the garage, but he wasn't there."

Marty nods, slow and thoughful, and picks up another glass to start wiping. "He heads home early often as not, nowadays. Gets tired real quick."

Dean pauses with his beer halfway to his lips. "Yeah? Why's that?"

"Cancer," Marty says, and nods sagely. "Damn shame. Man's had

enough pain in his life, if you ask me."

"Yeah," Dean murmurs, stomach dropping down to somewhere in the vicinity of his toes. He looks at the beer in his hand for a minute, then sets it back down. The condensation leaves a cool smear on his palm. "Can't argue that. Shit."

Marty gives him a smile that's a little too knowing. Freaking perceptive bartenders. "You gonna head over there?"

Dean hesitates, but only for a moment. It'd be freaking stupid to drive this far out of his way and then not stop in, anyway. "Yeah," he says finally, sliding out of his seat.

Sam glances up at him, eyebrows twisting. "Dean, what--"

"Finish your drink, Sammy."

"I could go with you."

"Nah, man, I gotta do this by myself. Finish your drink."

He can see the exact moment when the light dawns in Sam's eyes, when his breath catches and his brows drop and his mouth stutters open, but he doesn't say anything for a long moment. Then, finally, "Okay. I'll meet you back at the motel."

"Don't wait up," Dean says. The idea of coming back to the motel and trying to explain this to Sammy is enough to make him want to cut his own tongue out. With rusty scissors.

Sam shakes his head, leans his elbows onto the bar. "Do I ever?"

Dean smacks his head gently, gives Marty the most sincere smile he can pull onto his face, and gets the hell out of there.

***

He wonders if they can see it, sometimes, the fear of Hell beating itself against the back of his eyes. He thinks maybe not. If they could, they'd stay away, far away from him and his fucked up life and the shithole he drags everybody down into.

Caleb. Pastor Jim. Ash. Ellen's Roadhouse and all those nameless hunters in it. Dad.

Sam. Especially Sam.

If he'd just had the stones to go after Dad by himself, if he'd just left Sammy the fuck alone--

Maybe. And maybe not.

He wonders what Jay's gonna see when he looks into Dean's face.

***

What Jay says when Dean turns up at his house is, "Kid, you look like shit."

"Good to see you too," Dean says, grinning. If he looks like shit, Jay's not doing much better. His hair's light enough that it hides the gray pretty well, always has, but the lines are carved in deeper around his eyes and mouth and he looks like he hasn't slept in a month.

He reels Dean into a hug and it's a little surprising how good it feels. Dean doesn't much care for hugs in general, mostly because he doesn't know many people well enough to let them in close, but Jay's, he's--well, he's gotten in a lot closer than most people who aren't Sam or Dad.

He's lost some weight, but there's still wiry strength in his arms. He still smells the same, motor oil and cigarette smoke and cheap soap. His cheek is rough against Dean's, and they turn, slide into a kiss that feels unhurried, inevitable.

This isn't what he came for, except maybe it is. This is what they are to each other, after all. Somehow.

He pulls away, reaches for a smile and finds half of one. "So, can I come in?"

Jay laughs, and he sounds about as tired as Dean feels. They've both been worn down some by the years, and neither one of them was exactly shiny and new when they met. "Yeah," he says, and pulls the screen door open. "Come on in."

***

It's funny, how damn familiar it feels to have Dean sprawled out in his bed, after all this time. He's got more scars than Jay remembers, a tattoo on his chest and lines starting to write themselves into the corners of his eyes. Ain't more than twenty-nine, if Jay remembers right, but he looks more tired than most guys twice his age.

His eyes are closed, but he ain't sleeping. His mouth twitches into a smile when Jay sits back down on the edge of the mattress with a glass of water and flicks a few droplets at his face. "Hey."

"Good to see you," Jay says.

The smile turns into a full-on grin. "Don't most people get to the social niceties before they start with the fucking?"

"You complaining?"

"Nah." Dean blinks, opens his eyes. Sleepy green in the low afternoon light filtering in through the blinds; he's always had eyes pretty as a girl's. "You really feel like playing catch-up?"

Jay smiles. "What you been up to?"

"Killing monsters. Running from the law. You know."

"Thought I heard something about that."

"Lies and untruths, every last piece of it." The bed squeaks as Dean rolls onto his side. He ain't so hollow-eyed now as he was when he turned up earlier, but there's still something lost and lonely about his face that wasn't there the last time Jay saw him. "So, I talked to Marty."

Jay snorts. "Man's a gossip."

"Cancer, huh?"

"Looks like." He rolls away to pull a cigarette out of the pack on the bedside table, lies down on the tangled-up sheets to light it. Dean's eyes follow the motion, lazy in the dim light.

"You think it's really such a hot idea to be smoking?"

"Ain't like it's gonna make a difference now." The smoke burns his lungs and throat, the taste of it familiar ashes on his tongue. The doc would have a shit-fit, but Jay mostly don't bother with him.

"Yeah, I guess." Dean holds out his hand for the cigarette and after a hesitation Jay passes it over. The cherry glows red as he takes a drag, illuminating his shadowed face for a second. "How long they give you?"

"Year, maybe two. Guess we'll see."

"That sucks, man," Dean says quietly. "I'm sorry."

For a minute it looks like he's gonna say something else, but whatever it is stays behind his teeth and like always, Jay don't ask.

***

Dean leaves about an hour shy of midnight. He don't take coffee this time, but he does hug Jay on the doorstep, presses in close, chest to belly to hip, strong arms tight around Jay's back. He didn't bother showering before he got dressed again, and Jay can smell sweat and sex musk over the faint tang of smoke that always clings to Dean, like he lived in the fire long enough to brand its scent into his skin.

"I'll see you around," Dean says when he pulls away. He ain't smiling, and that's the first time it's ever really sounded like 'goodbye.'

***

There's light coming in through the curtains when Dean pulls the Impala up next to their room, and he grimaces. Of course Sam couldn't have the decency to pretend to be asleep. He's got sex hair, hickeys, and he smells like a freaking brothel. Maybe he should have showered back at Jay's place, but--

Fuck it. Not like Sam couldn't figure out what he went over there for. Not like he's ashamed of it.

When he gets inside, Sam's slouched on the bed nearest the window in

a pool of dusty lamplight, another one of Bobby's books open on his lap. He slaps it shut when Dean comes into the room, which means dollars to donuts he's poking around in something he shouldn't be.

Dean opens his mouth to tell him off, then shuts it again. Sam's looking him up and down, thoughtfully. It makes Dean feel itchy and too big for his skin. "See something you like?" he asks. It comes out brittle and sharper than he means it to.

Sam shakes his head, face softening. "You're such a jackass," he says gently.

"Yeah, whatever." His voice sounds more normal, so he backs it up with a smirk and reaches for the bathroom door behind him. "I'm taking a shower. You better get your beauty sleep, Sasquatch."

"Dean--"

The doorknob's in his hand and he backs into the bathroom, away from his brother's understanding stare. "I mean it. I wanna head out early tomorrow, and I'm not waiting on your lazy ass."

The door swings shut on Sam's sigh.

When he gets out of the shower, the lights are off and Sam's stripped down to t-shirt and boxers, face mashed in his pillow. He's not sleeping, Dean can tell, but he doesn't say anything when Dean pulls on a pair of old sweatpants and faceplants on his own bed.

***

"We could stop by before we leave."

Dean shifts his coffee to his other hand to dig the keys out of his pocket and unlocks the Impala. "What?"

"To see Jay." Sam's stirring his own coffee with way more concentration than the task really requires. "If you want."

Oh, Christ, here they go with the sharing and caring. It's way too fucking early for this. "Sam, we got five hundred miles to go and I'd like to get to D.C. before dark if it's all the same to you." He drops into his seat and reaches across to open the passenger side door. "Come

on."

Sam slides into his seat and pulls the door shut behind him, still staring into his coffee like it holds the secrets to the universe. He glances up when Dean turns the engine on. His expression isn't quite irritated enough to be a full-on bitchface, but it's not far off. "Dean, you don't have to-"

"Dude, seriously. Can it," Dean says, and pops the first tape he can lay his hands on into the cassette player. Black Sabbath. Sam groans and drops his head back, and Dean grins as he pulls out onto the entrance ramp. The sun's not quite over the hills behind them, drawing the long black shadows of trees across the highway as Canfield fades in their rearview mirror.

Sam gives it almost an hour before he reaches out to turn the music down. Dean heaves an enormous, put-upon sigh, which is summarily ignored. "Dean."

"What, Sam?"

"I just want to--" Sam makes a frustrated little noise, and when Dean glances over at him he's wearing an expression of combined sympathy and aggravation that kind of makes him look constipated. "I know you haven't had a lot of opportunities for, you know. Normal."

"So, what, you figure I missed out on my chance for the rainbow pride version of the white picket fence?"

"That's not what I meant," Sam says.

Dean snorts and taps the accelerator, savoring the low engine rumble as they crest the top of the hill. It's too cold to leave the windows open, especially at seventy-five miles an hour, but the glass has a kind of greenhouse effect with the sun this bright, and the coffee was strong enough to make him twitchy. And Sam won't stop. Fucking. Staring.

"It wasn't like that," he says finally. "Okay? Me and Jay, it wasn't like that. It was--even if I wasn't a hunter, we never would have--" He shrugs, eyes carefully ahead. "It was just a thing, okay?"

"That's--wow." Sam huffs out a laugh. "I think that's actually even more depressing."

Dean smiles, reluctantly. "Hey, you asked."

"I'm sorry, man," Sam says, all sincere puppy eyes, and Dean sighs. It wasn't like he was expecting Sam to freak out about this whole thing, but in a lot of ways that might have made things easier. This kind of sympathetic understanding is really more than he can handle.

"It's no big deal. He's got his life, I got mine."

Jay has Mae and her daughters, his shop to take care of, a little house on a couple of acres of green land. He has a life, and Dean isn't a part of that. Not really.

"Dean," Sam's voice is gentle. "You know I don't--"

"Seriously, man," Dean says. The last thing he needs in his life right now is Sam trying to give him the PFLAG speech. "Drop it, okay?"

He turns Ozzy back up, and Sam sighs, and that's that.

***

May 2008

He comes home from the shop early on a Monday afternoon, half-minded to just sleep the rest of the day away. Gets so damn tired lately, like his body's slowly forgetting how to be itself, and even the heavy-duty shit they give him nowadays don't quite keep the pain at bay. Mike's got the shop in line, anyhow.

He ain't got more than half a brain left in that junkie head of his, but he's a fine mechanic. He'll look after things when the time comes.

There's a missed call blinking on the answering machine. Dean's number. And a message, which definitely ain't normal. Dean ain't called him since he stopped in last fall, and he never leaves messages.

He pushes the button while he's setting his keys and wallet down on the table, and the young, unmistakably drunk voice that fills his kitchen definitely ain't Dean's.

"Hey. Jay. It's Sam. Sam Winchester. I guess you probably don't remember

me--" a snort that sounds almost like a sob, and Jay feels like his stomach just dropped down to his boots all of a sudden. *"Anyway. I know you guys were--I don't know what the fuck was goin' on, but you were friends. Or something. It's just. Dean's dead. He's--it was--anyway."* Softer, small and raw, he adds, *"Just thought you should know."*

The message cuts off, and Jay closes his eyes, remembers the shadows living in Dean's face the last time he was here, the sentences he wouldn't quite finish, and thinks maybe he should have known right then.

Could be any number of things. It's a dangerous gig; easy to tell that much just from the scars Dean had written across his skin. Lotta bad things lurking out there, and every hunter meets his match sooner or later.

Somehow, though, Jay don't think that was it at all.

His shoulders feel like something dropped a couple tons of lead on them and his chest is aching, but he already knows he ain't gonna get to sleep now. Instead, he takes his truck out and drives with the radio off until the sky is dark and all he can see is the double yellow beneath his headlights. There's a part of him that wants to stop somewhere and howl at the sky, punch a tree, drink himself to a stupor, but it ain't like it'd make any difference. Ain't a sorrow he has any real right to, after all. You can't lose something that was never really yours to begin with.

He drives all night. When the sun slips pale and yellow into the edge of the sky, he stops at a gas station in a town he don't recognize to buy a cup of coffee and three packs of cigarettes. Then he turns around and starts heading home.

He chain-smokes all the way back.

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January, 2009

He sleeps more than he's awake these days, or drifts in the space between sleeping and waking. Mae comes in with Missy around late morning. She's gone and got tall, taller than her big sister, and Mae

just looks old. Her lips are soft and cool when she leans in to kiss his forehead and promises to come back tomorrow. She looks so sad that he wants to tell her it's okay, but he's already sinking back into a hazy darkness.

Next time he opens his eyes, there's a ghost standing over his bed, watching him with haunted green eyes.

Ain't the ghost he was hoping to see, maybe, but Keith's been gone a long while now. If he was gonna come haunt Jay, he would have done it by now.

"You don't look so good," the ghost murmurs.

"Don't feel so good," Jay whispers hoarsely. "You're dead. Sam called."

"Nah," Dean says. "Not anymore."

That makes about as much sense as Dean ever did. Jay finds he don't much mind. Ghost or no ghost, it's good to have a little company here at the end. "Reckon I'll be setting up housekeeping in Hell soon enough."

"Don't say that."

He sounds so fierce, so bright and alive that Jay can't hardly look at him. Hard to look at anything, the way the drugs make his head all fuzzy, and his eyes slide away from Dean, across the pale walls soaked with sunlight. There's a vase of flowers by the window. He thinks maybe Nellie left it the last time she came by. She's still working at the hospital. Pediatrics, not the cancer ward, but she visits when she can. Most mornings after her shift.

He don't know how long he drifts, but when he looks back, Dean's standing closer. He looks too old, and there are scars written deep behind his smile. Still too damn beautiful for this world.

Jay fumbles his fingers out from under the covers, reaches across the stretch of bedspread. His limbs feel heavy these days, weak and useless. Hard to remember the shape of a gun in his hands, the smell of motor oil, the coiled danger of the hunt. That's how he'd have gone out, if he had a say, but the world ain't kind enough to let a man choose his own end, most times.

Dean's fingers curl around his, warm and strong. Almost like being alive again.

"I'm sorry about this," he says in a low voice. "This--this fucking sucks."

"Don't have to tell me that," Jay mumbles.

"Yeah, I guess not." He squeezes Jay's hand, hard enough to hurt, but Jay don't try to pull away. Damn crazy kid looks guilty, of all things. "Still. Wish there was something I could do."

Jay smiles. "There is, if y'all don't mind breaking into my place."

Dean almost smiles back. "Never did mind a little B and E."

"Got a fine old M1911 in the bedside table," Jay murmurs. "It was my daddy's, back in 'Nam."

"Jay, I'm not bringing you a goddamn gun."

It's almost enough to make him chuckle. "Ain't asking you to. I want you to take it. Nellie don't like guns and Mae ain't allowed to own one. I got nobody else to leave it to."

"There's a sad commentary," Dean mutters, and that does make him chuckle.

"Yeah, I reckon."

Dean's quiet for a minute, and Jay just watches him. He don't look much like the cocky teenager who hustled pool at Rocky's all those years ago. Got a few years on him now, some wear and tear, but he's still standing and that's what matters, in the end.

"Yeah, okay," Dean says finally. "I'll take it."

His mouth curls into a lopsided half-smile that makes Jay smile back at him, hazy and slow. His eyelids are drooping shut again. So fucking tired. "Glad I met you, kid."

"I'm not your damn kid, Jay," Dean grumbles, but his fingers shift and grip tighter. The pressure is like an anchor. "I'm glad I met you too."

***

He drifts for a long time after Dean leaves. There ain't no pain. There's never any pain, all the shit they pump into him these days. He watches the shadows of the sun slide down the wall into dark, ignores the orderly when she comes in to straighten up.

Around sunset, there's a strange, dark-haired man in a long coat standing by the window. His eyes are a shade of blue that Jay can see even in the gloom, and the room smells like a summer storm.

They stare at each other for a long while, and then Jay blinks and he's gone.

***

The moon's painting shadows across his bedsheets when he wakes up again. His mind's clearer than it has been in weeks, and when he sucks in a startled breath it comes easy.

"Hello, Jay."

She's standing at the foot of his bed, a pretty little thing with ancient eyes and a short cap of dark hair framing her face.

Jay ain't had the strength to sit up on his own for a while now, but he don't even realize he's moving until he's standing barefoot on the cool tile floor. His limbs feel light, easy and loose in a way they haven't since before Kuwait, but he don't spare more than a second to notice that. "What the hell are you?"

The fact that he's asking *what* and not *who* probably tells something about the effect Dean Winchester's had on him. She don't make a move, but there's something about her, something *other*, that makes his palms itch for a weapon.

"My name is Tessa. I'm a friend of Dean's." She pauses, smiles suddenly, sweet and strange. "Well. Friend is probably too strong a word, but we know each other."

"That so?"

"Yes." Now she's stepping forward, one hand out. "Jay, it's time to

leave. You have people waiting for you."

"What the hell are--"

His leg hits the bed and he looks down, reflexively.

Somehow, he ain't even surprised to see himself lying there like a skeleton under the cheap yellow blankets. Head turned into the pillow, face slack, hands curled like dead spiders against his chest. Which ain't moving.

"What the everloving fuck is this?" he whispers, like he don't already know. Hard not to, standing here and looking down at his own withered body. Christ. He looks a thousand years old.

"You know what it is," Tessa says gently.

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess I do." He barks out a raspy laugh, looks up at her. "So, this is how it goes?"

"Yes." She cocks her head, studying him. "You're less argumentative than he was."

"Reckon there ain't much I can do about it now," Jay says, staring down at his own corpse.

"No," Tessa says. "There isn't."

She don't sound sorry, but there ain't any meanness in it either. Just the facts, ma'am. Jay can live with that. So to speak. "Friend of Dean's, huh?"

"Acquaintance," she says, and holds out a hand to him. "It's a long story."

Maybe he'll hear about it on the other side.

He takes her hand, and the world slides gently away from him.

***

Nellie's the one to call him that night, even though they hardly know each other. She's crying. It isn't a long conversation.

Afterward, Dean flips the phone shut, sits down on his bed, stares at the stained-plastic coffee maker on the dresser across the room, and waits for Sam to come back.

It's after three in the morning when he does, humming with a freakish and unnatural energy the way he always does after he's out with Ruby. His pupils are blown and he smells like sex and Dean can vaguely recall a time that would have made him grin and jab and mock.

"Hey," he says instead.

Time was, Sam would have heard all the ways he can't hide how tired he is, how fucking depressed. Time was, Sam would have given a shit, but now he just plops onto the bed and starts untying his shoes, motions too-fast and jerky in a way that makes Dean queasy. "Hey, man. Did you go see Jay? How's he doing?"

He doesn't know. Can't know, but the easy casualness of the question sparks off a violent surge of anger. "He's dead," Dean snaps, and reaches out to twist the knob of the bedside lamp off, hard, throwing the room into darkness.

Sam makes a sound in the back of his throat that's somewhere between concerned and exasperated, and Christ, Dean never thought he'd actually miss Sam's attempts at playing amateur psychologist. He rolls away onto his side, facing the window. It's drizzling outside, the slick pavement shining under the streetlamp.

"I'm sorry," Sam murmurs after a couple of minutes, and for a wonder it actually sounds like he means it.

Something unclenches a little in Dean's chest. "Yeah, whatever," he says, rolling back toward Sam. His brother is a silent, broad-shouldered shadow in the dark room. "Get some sleep."

"Not really tired."

"Get some sleep anyway."

Sam sighs, but doesn't argue. The bed creaks as he lays back, and Dean closes his eyes and focuses on the sound of Sam's breathing, the rustle of his clothes and the clink of change in his jeans as he kicks

them off, little mundane noises to drown out the echoes of Hell.

Sometimes, it even works.

***

They swing by Jay's house early the next morning. Dean drives, and Sam sits in the passenger seat, radiating disgruntled confusion.

Jay's truck is still parked by the house. One tire is flat, and there's a spiderweb laced between the side mirror and the radio antenna.

"You going to tell me what we're doing here?" Sam asks.

Dean pulls in next to the truck and cuts the engine. "Jay asked me to take something."

"I thought you said he--"

"He was awake for a little while when I was there," Dean says. He wants to snap, but it's hard to find the energy, remembering Jay lying there in that hospital bed like he was already three-quarters of the way in his grave. Sometimes, death's a mercy. He knows that but still, Jay was always--he wasn't exactly a bouncy kind of guy, but he always had a tension to him, a ready stillness that Dean liked. It was just--weird, seeing that gone.

And now he's gone, too. It would be nice to be able to say *gone to a better place*, and believe it. Gone to a better place than Dean went, anyway. He can believe that much.

"Then how did you know? I mean, that he died. The hospital didn't have your number, did they?"

"Nellie called me, okay? Last night, while you were, you know. Out."

If Sam notices the snideness in that remark, he ignores it. "Nellie?"

"Mae's daughter. You remember," except Sam obviously doesn't. That was kind of Dean's gig, anyway. He opens the door and steps out onto the packed gravel driveway. On the other side of the Impala, Sam does the same. "You can wait here," Dean adds. "I'm not gonna be long."

"I'll come with you."

Dean shrugs. "Whatever."

"So, what are you taking, anyway?"

"His dad's service pistol. He wanted me to have it." That means something, Dean knows, and not just that Jay didn't have anybody else to leave it to. Hell if he knows what, though.

Sam shakes his head. He looks big, silhouetted against the rising sun, a little out of place for some reason Dean can't place. He's only been in Canfield once since he was a teenager, hasn't seen Jay in years. Barely knew him, really.

It's funny, to remember that there are huge chunks of Dean's life that Sam wasn't there for. 'Course, if he'd been there, maybe they wouldn't have happened at all.

"So, we're breaking into your boyfriend's house to steal a gun. That's classy."

"He wasn't my boyfriend," Dean says absently, digging his picks out of his pocket. "And anyway, he told me to take the gun."

Sam shakes his head, clearly unconvinced. "You never told me--"

"Nothing to tell." He takes the sagging steps two at a time. The lock's old and cheap, and it takes him all of ten seconds to get it open.

It's musty inside, but not as bad as he thought it would be. Probably Nellie or Mae came by to air the place out every once in a while. The lingering smell of tobacco is still there, though, sunk into the furniture and the curtains through the years. Cigarette smoke and dust, hanging golden in the air where the sun comes in.

The couch is new. Newer, anyway. Looks like Jay finally got around to replacing the torn-up wallpaper over the kitchen table. On top of the TV, there's a framed photo of Nellie in her graduation gown, arm around her little sister.

It's cheap, bare, and not all that clean, but even after all these years it's familiar. Comfortable.

Sam shuts the door gently, and when he speaks again his voice is quieter, less combative. "You never really told me. About you and Jay."

Dean shrugs with one shoulder, runs his thumb along the top of the TV, picking up dust. "We were..."

He doesn't really know how to explain it. *Lovers* just sounds fucking stupid, in addition to not really being true. Fuckbuddies, he guesses. Friends, definitely.

He settles on, "Well, you know," even though Sam doesn't.

"Okay," Sam murmurs. "Okay, Dean."

Dean rolls his eyes. "Wait here."

"I could--"

"Wait here, Sam."

"Okay," Sam says again, unusually subdued.

***

The bed isn't made. The sheets are rumpled, dollar-store blue cotton, and the floorboards creak under his boots. There's another picture on the low dresser, the only other one in this house that's framed. He's seen it before. Inside the cheap gilt frame, two guys are sitting on the front step of a run-down trailer with a huge blue sky spread out behind them, knees bumping, heads canted together, casual and intimate in a way that Dean recognizes from the old pictures of his parents.

He doesn't know the lanky guy with glasses and a huge grin, but the other guy is Jay. Years younger than Dean ever knew him, hair cropped military-short and posture easy. Smiling.

There's dust on the glass, and Dean uses the hem of his t-shirt to clean it off.

The bedside table is the same one that was there the first time he spent the night here. Scarred yellow wood, and the drawer creaks

when he pulls it open. Jay used to keep condoms and lube in here, but he must have cleaned that shit out before he checked himself into the hospital. So as not to traumatize Nellie, probably. Or maybe Mae tossed it, who knows.

Anyway, no sex supplies in there now. Just an old M1911 .45 with a deep scratch on the barrel sitting on top of a pile of junk mail and expired receipts. Dean pulls it out, tries the weight of it. It fits well, rough acrylic grip warming to his hand.

There's a photo sitting under the gun. An old snapshot, fuzzy and faded and bent at the corners, and somehow Dean isn't even that surprised to see his own face looking back out of it. Jay hung onto that picture. He doesn't know how he's supposed to feel about that.

Christ, he's turning into such a chick these days. It's just a fucking photo.

Still, he slips it in his pocket before tucking Jay's father's gun into the waistband of his jeans. Not like Nellie or Mae are gonna have any use for it, after all. He slides the drawer shut and then, somehow, finds himself sitting down on the edge of the mattress, staring blindly at the crooked shades on the window across from him.

It's gusting damp wind outside, but the air feels heavy and still in here. Too full of everything he never knew how to talk about, all the shit Jay never made him say. Six years of coffee for the road in plastic cups. Fuck.

"Dean?" Sam says quietly from the door.

Dean rubs a hand over his face, shakes his head sharply. "Yeah. I'm good."

He pulls his game face on before he turns back toward where his brother is waiting, and if it's a little ragged around the edges, Sam doesn't mention it. He looks concerned, all earnest puppy-eyes, and that's almost enough to make Dean smile. "Was there anything else--"

"I'm good," Dean says again, and pushes himself to his feet. "Let's go."

He locks the door again on his way out, presses his palm against the battered metal for a moment before following Sam back to the Impala.

***

Leaves are falling all around, it's time I was on my way.
Thanks to you, I'm much obliged for such a pleasant stay.
But now it's time for me to go. The autumn moon lights my way--
For now I smell the rain, and with it pain, and it's headed my way.
Sometimes I grow so tired, but I know I've got one thing I got to do--
-Ramble On
Led Zeppelin

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